JORDAN

THE ROOKIE SEASON

MJ HAD A LOT TO PROVE BEFORE HE BECAME THE GREATEST

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JORDAN THE ROOKIE SEASON

MJ HAD A LOT TO PROVE
BEFORE HE BECAME
THE GREATEST

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Chicago
23

Even after he'd hit the winning shot for North Carolina in the 1982 NCAA title game, Jordan wasn't considered a future superstar.

INTRODUCTION

Before He Was the GOAT

MICHAEL JORDAN'S LEGACY WASN'T ALWAYS A SURE THING

HE IS, UNQUESTIONABLY, one of the greatest athletes in history and—to many—the best basketball player ever to play the game. But there was a time when Michael Jordan was just another player, one who represented promise, potential and question marks. He wasn't a prodigy like LeBron James or Kobe Bryant. He wasn't physically dominant like Wilt Chamberlain or Shaquille O'Neal. And he wasn't even the first (or second) player chosen in the 1984 NBA draft.

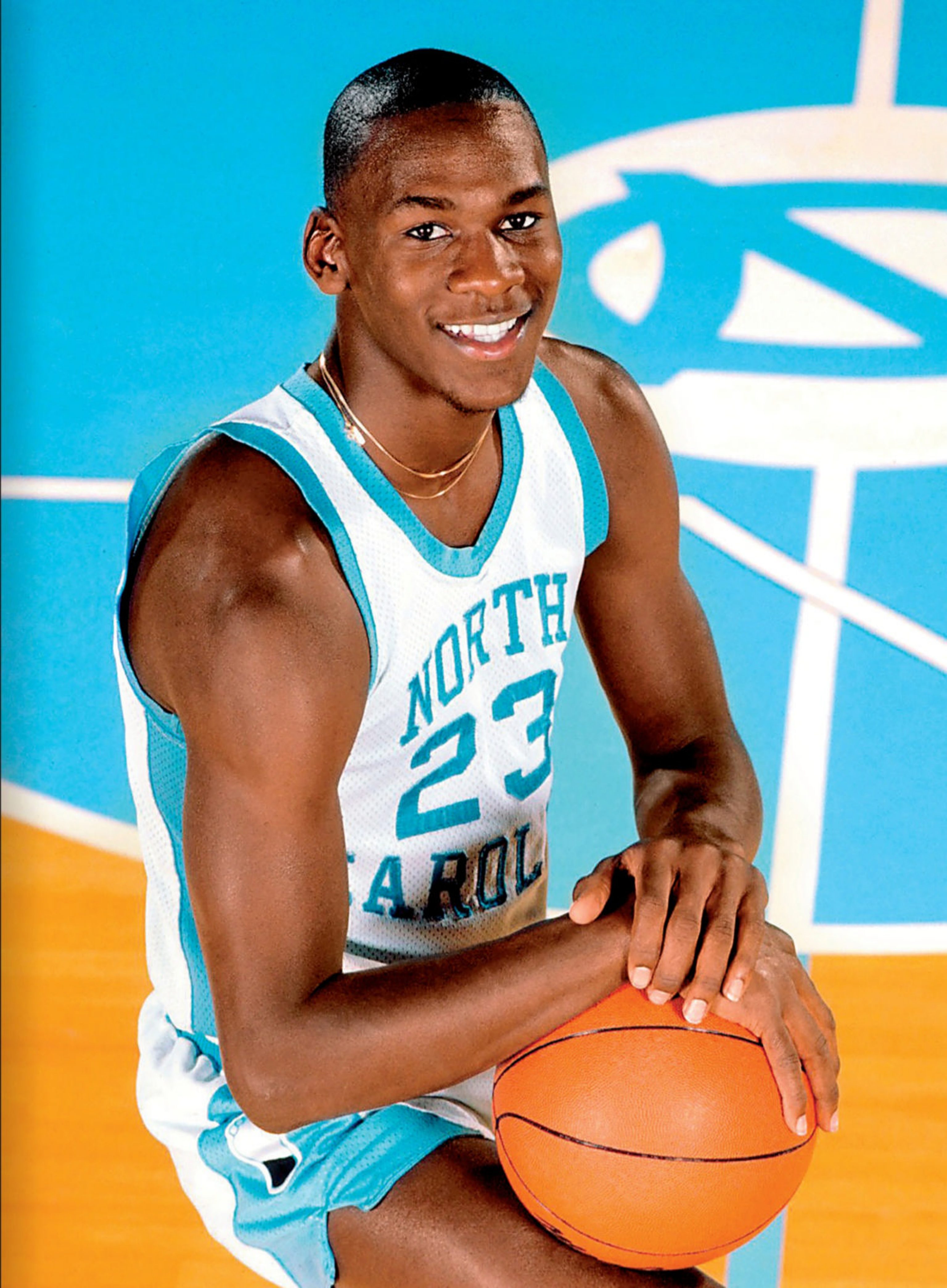
For a long time—until he led the Chicago Bulls to the franchise's first-ever world championship following the 1990–91 season, which was his seventh year in the league—Jordan had a lot to prove.

A young Mike Jordan didn't make his varsity high school basketball team as a sophomore because, at 5-foot-11, he was considered too short and too raw. When he entered the University of North Carolina, he played in the shadow of star James Worthy. The scouting report on Jordan was that he was a good athlete, but one who was iffy on defense and unreliable when forced to shoot from the outside.

This perception started to change once Jordan, as a freshman, hit the game-winning shot for the Tar Heels in the championship game of the 1982 NCAA Tournament. "That was the birth of Michael Jordan," he said in a 2016 interview on CBS. "Before that I was Mike Jordan. All of a sudden, I make that shot and I'm Michael."

Jordan gained confidence from his magical moment on the national stage. But when he left college in the NBA, he had to start all over again. Playing on a perennially losing team in a league dominated by the likes of Magic Johnson and Larry Bird—both in their prime—plenty of people wondered whether Jordan was capable of becoming an elite player in his own era, let alone one for all time.

The doubts didn't discourage Jordan—they fueled his desire to prove everyone wrong. And, in the end, that's what made him so special.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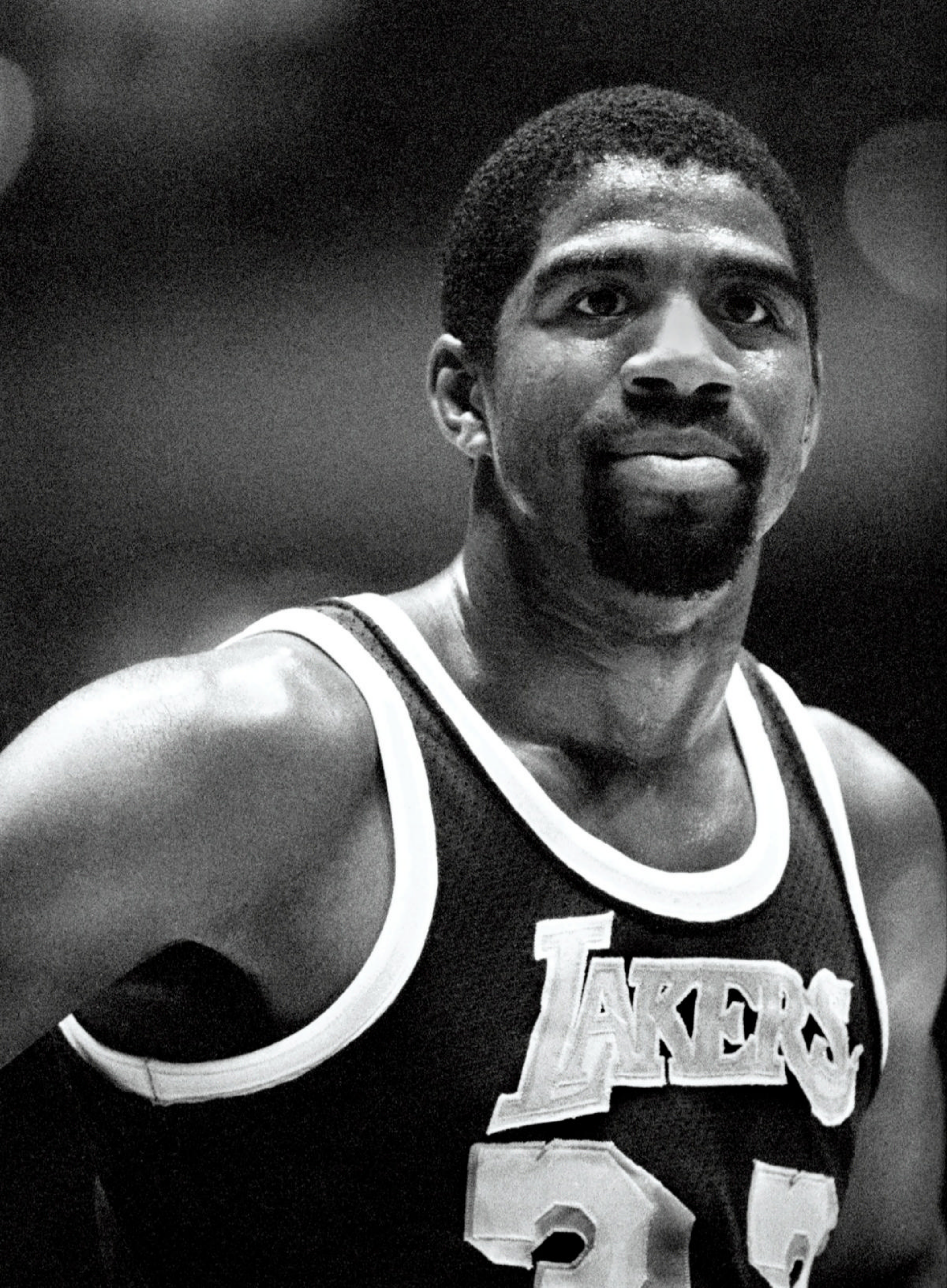
LAKERS

The NBA's fortunes started to change after Earvin "Magic" Johnson was drafted by the Los Angeles Lakers in 1979.

CHAPTER 1

Magic, Bird & Dr. J

JORDAN ENTERED THE NBA AT THE DAWN OF ITS GOLDEN ERA

Bill Russell (6) and Wilt Chamberlain (13) were two superstars of the early NBA.

THE HISTORY OF THE NBA began in 1949 when two rival leagues—the National Basketball League (founded in 1937) and the Basketball Association of America (1946)—joined forces. Three decades later, the NBA grew once again, taking in four teams from the decaying American Basketball Association.

The early years of professional basketball featured some immortal players, including Wilt Chamberlain, Bill Russell, Bob Cousy and George Mikan. But, compared to the overall level of talent and athleticism that fans enjoy today, the league was very different.

The NBA was also plagued by problems. Most of its games were played in half-filled arenas. Television ratings were often alarmingly low—even the NBA Finals were not always broadcast live, or at all. In many parts of the country college basketball was far more popular than the NBA—something that still holds true in some parts of the U.S. today. And the league was a distant third, trailing MLB and the NFL, for the hearts and minds of sports fans.

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CELTICS
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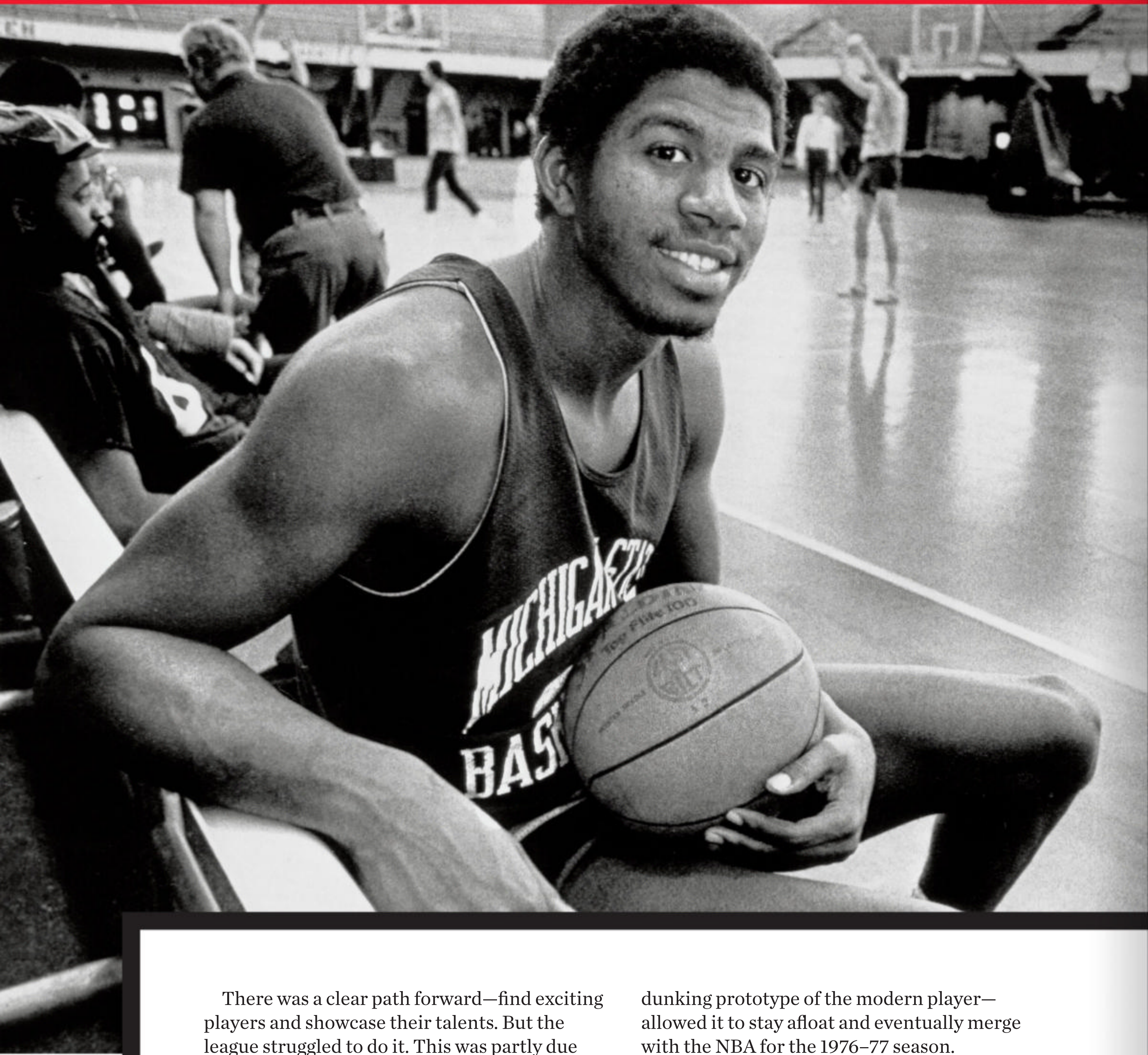

There was a clear path forward—find exciting players and showcase their talents. But the league struggled to do it. This was partly due to the NBA rule that barred players from entering the league until they were at least four years out of high school. The rival American Basketball Association had made an exception for players whose families needed the money. The "hardship rule" meant Julius "Dr. J" Erving was able to join the ABA's Virginia Squires for the 1971–72 season. The ABA faced its own fight to survive, but the league's ability to hang on to Dr. J—the skywalking, slam-dunking prototype of the modern player—allowed it to stay afloat and eventually merge with the NBA for the 1976–77 season.

Soon after, in 1979, two college superstars set cornerstones on both the East and West coasts when Earvin "Magic" Johnson joined the Los Angeles Lakers and Larry Bird signed with the Boston Celtics. Suddenly, there were good reasons to follow the NBA, or at least to watch highlights of Magic's Lakers, Bird's Celtics, and Dr. J's Philadelphia 76ers.

As for the other franchises, the struggle more or less continued. Of the 23 teams that existed

from 1979 to '81, 16 lost money. During that same period, several NBA Finals games were broadcast on tape delay—at 11:30 p.m.—after the local news on the East Coast.

Away from the spotlight hogged by the marquee franchises, the NBA was a messy affair. Too many players fought during games. And some reports claimed that many of the league's players during this era regularly indulged in cocaine use.

Through it all, Magic, Bird and Dr. J continued to thrive. In 1983–84, the Lakers and Celtics went toe-to-toe in a thrilling,

As a sophomore in 1978–79, Johnson (left) led Michigan State to a national title.

Red Auerbach (above, left), president of the Boston Celtics, with Larry Bird (center).

There was a clear path forward—find exciting players and showcase their talents. But the league struggled to do it.

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BIRD
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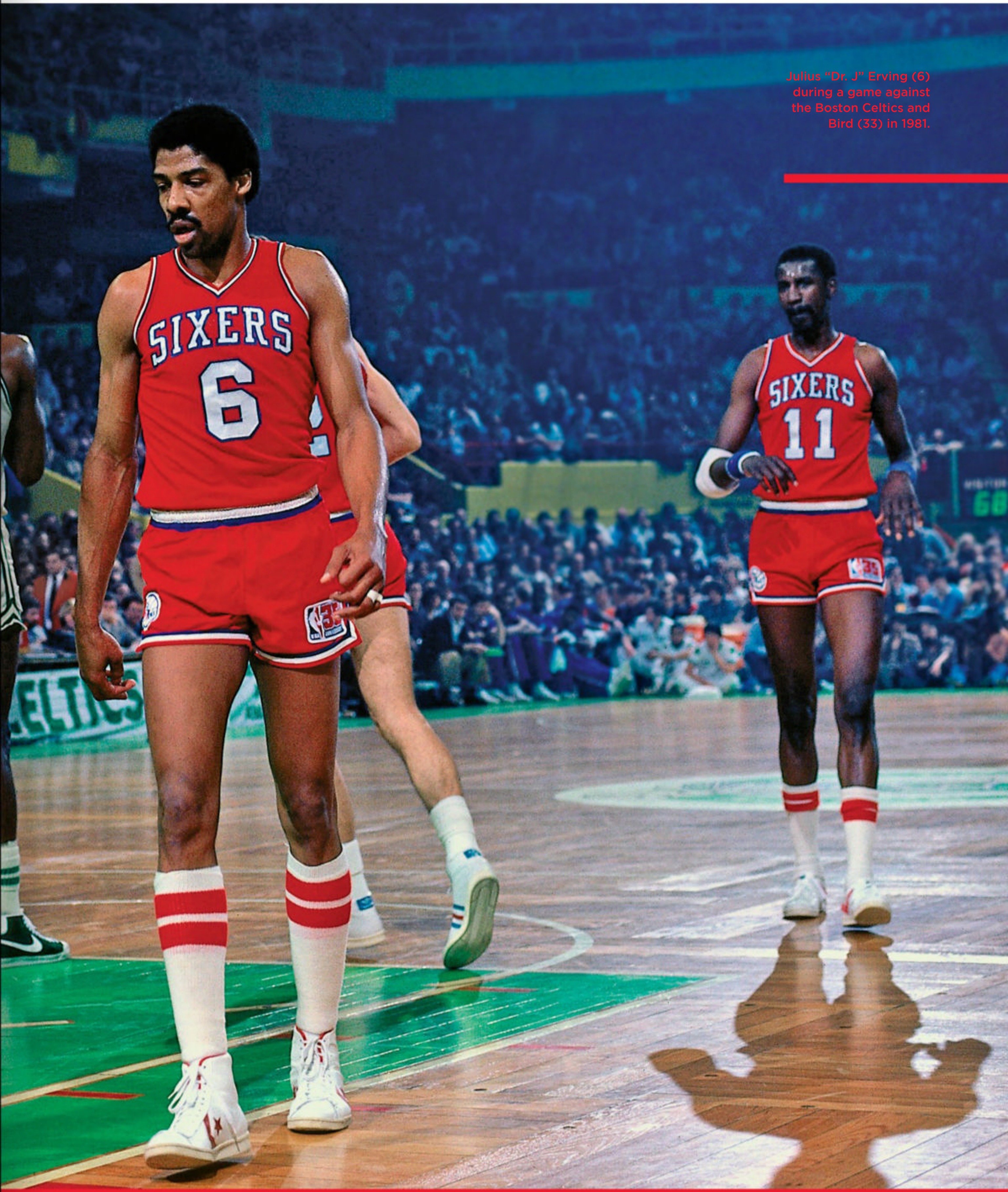

SIXERS
6
SIXERS
11
CELTICS

Julius "Dr. J" Erving (6) during a game against the Boston Celtics and Bird (33) in 1981.

CELTICS
SPALDING
NBA
LAKERS

The legendary rivalry between Bird and Magic rejuvenated the moribund NBA.

seven-game Finals. The series was broadcast on CBS, even though the audience that watched Boston win the championship averaged out to less than half of the season's top-rated prime time TV shows.

Meanwhile, the Chicago Bulls finished the '83–84 season with a forgettable record of 27–55, good for 10th place in the Eastern Conference. The team's leading scorer was Quintin Dailey, a 6-foot-3 shooting guard who personified the league's hard-luck side. Dailey, the seventh pick in the 1982 NBA draft, arrived with a history of off-the-court troubles, including an accusation of sexual assault, that dated back to his college career at the University of San Francisco. He was not the kind of player to promote as the face of the franchise.

But for fans looking to find reasons to believe, the Bulls did hold the third pick in the 1984 draft. They didn't have a shot at the top player—Nigerian big man Hakeem Olajuwon—but if Chicago made the right choice, it might eventually help change the team's bad fortune.

Michael Jordan goofs around with North Carolina teammate Sam Perkins (bottom) in 1983.

CHAPTER 2

Tar Heel Training

JORDAN'S POTENTIAL WAS UNLOCKED AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA

NORTH
23

Jordan takes a moment to catch his breath on the court while playing for the Tar Heels.

M

MICHAEL JORDAN MADE his name at North Carolina, but he'd also been recruited to play basketball at Duke, South Carolina, Syracuse and Virginia. He chose to stay in his home state and wear Tar Heel blue largely due to the influence of coach Dean Smith.

In 2013, Jordan admitted to *Slam* magazine that he was "scared" and "intimidated" by Smith during the recruiting process, but he couldn't get the coach out of his mind. "His reputation preceded him," Jordan explained.

His reputation was as a winner. Smith had endured only one losing season at Carolina after becoming coach in 1961—his first. But despite the program's formidably high standards, Jordan also found Smith to be "easy to talk to" and a "very knowledgeable, very caring coach." That was why Jordan decided to play for the Tar Heels.

It was the best decision he could have made.

Jordan needed the kind of structure Smith provided, as well as the coaching. Smith was intense and he drove his players hard. He also expected them to listen, learn, and do whatever he told

STATE
41
NORTH
23
CAROLINA

them to do—anything to help the team. No one, not even a player as talented as Jordan, could cross the line.

"I remember my first mistake," Jordan wrote in his 2005 book, *Driven From Within*. "I went baseline and tried to do a reverse move, and he just yelled, 'Where do you think you are? Do you think you're back at E.A. Laney High School? You're not. You're in college. Do you think that was a good shot?'"

"Obviously, you can't say 'yes,'" Jordan wrote. "He made you think."

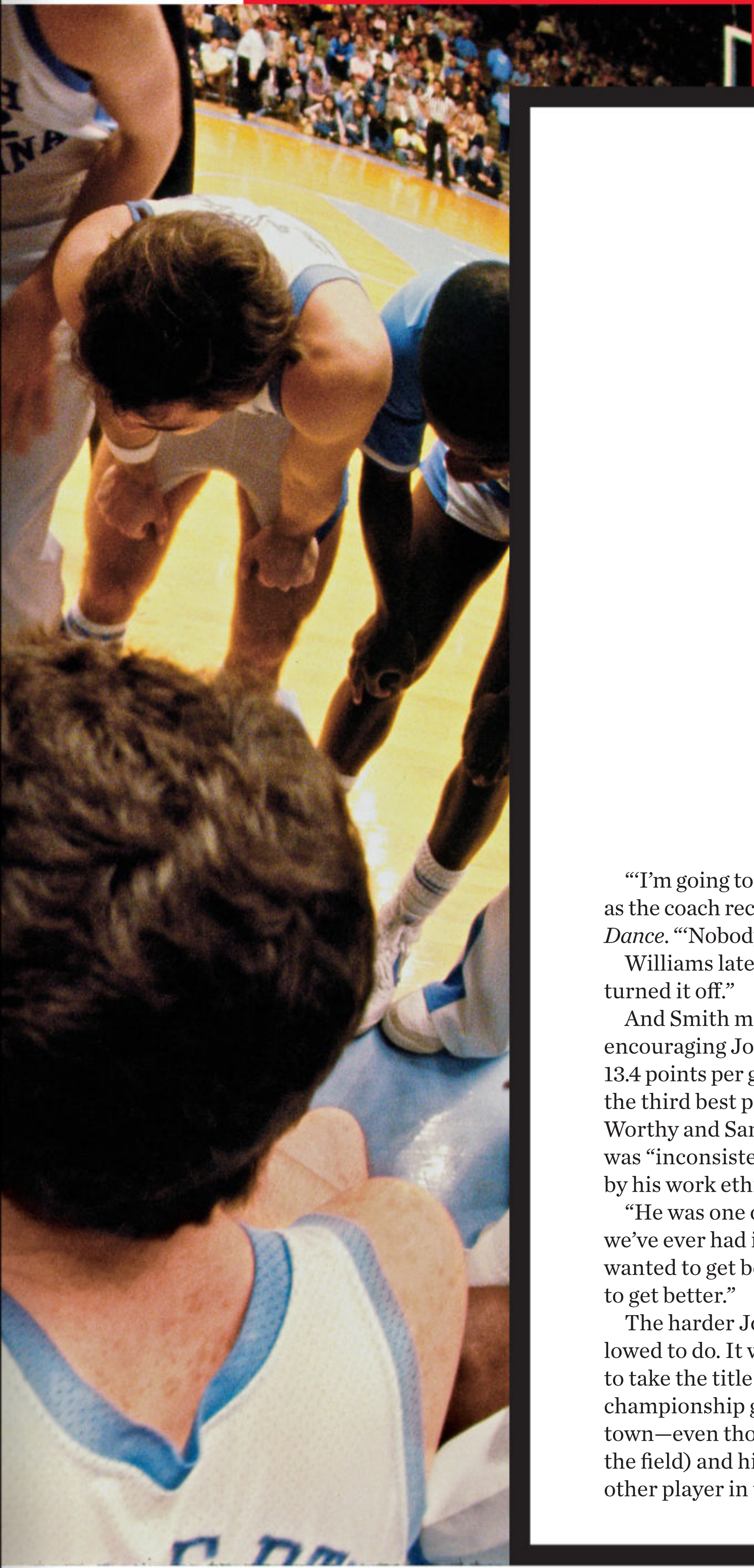
Jordan (23) drives to the basket against North Carolina State on Jan. 13, 1982.

North Carolina coach Dean Smith (far right) exults after an NCAA tournament win in 1968.

Smith also made his players work—an ethic that Jordan embraced and thrived on. When he'd arrived in Chapel Hill, Jordan had told assistant coach Roy Williams that he intended to be the best player the school had ever had. Williams told him that to do that he was going to have to outwork everyone.

NORTH
33
CAROLINA
NORTH
43
CAROLINA

NORTH CAROLINA
32
UNC
JORDAN



Jordan (seated) valued Smith (center, in suit) as a mentor, teacher and second father.

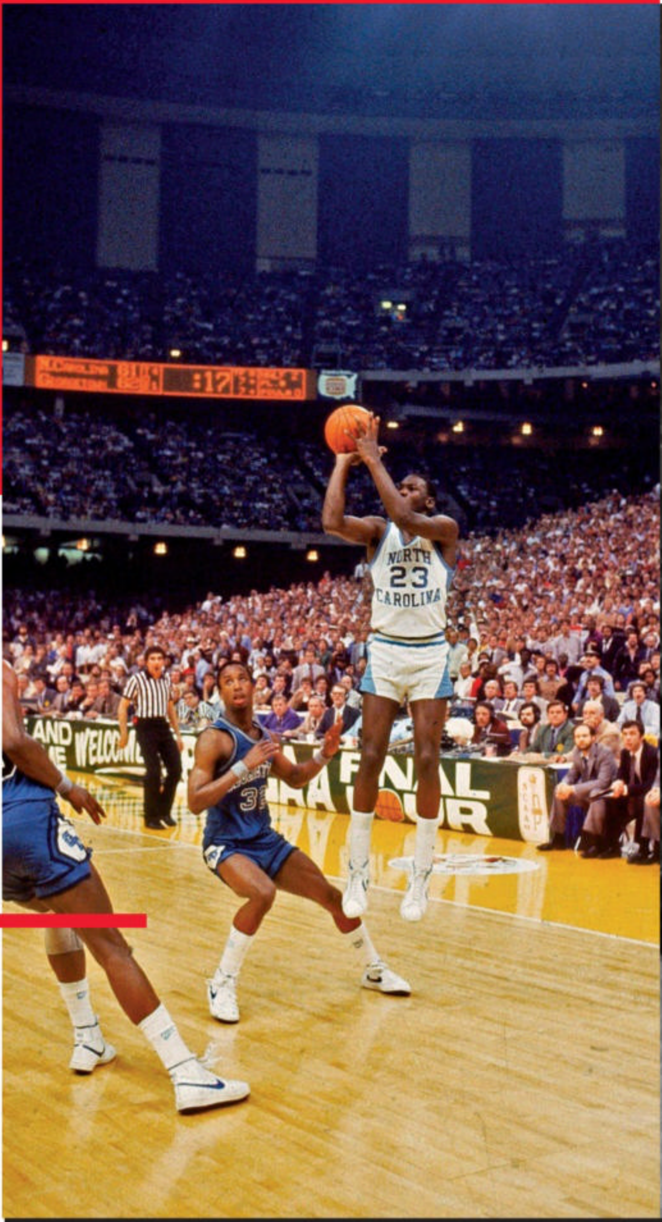
"'I'm going to show you,'" Jordan told Williams, as the coach recalled in the documentary *The Last Dance*. "'Nobody will ever work as hard as I work.'"

Williams later recalled, "He never freaking turned it off."

And Smith made sure he didn't by continually encouraging Jordan to do more. He averaged 13.4 points per game as a freshman, but he was still the third best player on the team behind James Worthy and Sam Perkins. Smith said that Jordan was "inconsistent as a freshman" but he could tell by his work ethic that his ceiling was high.

"He was one of the most competitive [players] we've ever had in our drills," Smith said. "He wanted to get better and then he had the ability to get better."

The harder Jordan worked the more he was allowed to do. It was Smith who encouraged Jordan to take the title-winning shot in the 1982 NCAA championship game—a 63–62 win over Georgetown—even though Worthy was hot (13 of 17 from the field) and his 28 points were more than every other player in the game.



Jordan jumps to make the winning shot in the 1982 NCAA title game (above).

The Tar Heels' bench erupts (above, right) in the final seconds of the 1982 NCAA final.

> *"He was the perfect guy for me. He kept me humble, but he challenged me....[He] made it fun to learn."*

Viewers at home were surprised that the freshman had been trusted with so much at stake—but his teammates were not. In *The Last Dance*, Worthy recalled the end of a two-and-a-half-hour practice, saying, "I'm walking off the floor like drenched [in] sweat, tired. And here comes Michael pushing me back on the floor, wanting to play a little one-on-one, wanting to see where his game was.

"I was better than he was," Worthy said, "for about two weeks."

Jordan emerged as a consensus All-America as a sophomore, when he averaged 20.0 points

per game. But he was still turning to Smith to help him get better. After the season, Smith sendt Jordan a hand-written letter with an eight-point plan for improving his game. It included instructions to "shoot the ball the same way each time," work on his point guard skills in pick-up games, improve his "quick ball fakes," and not reach on defense.

Smith wrote, "If you do improve on these items we mentioned, you will be a much better basketball player and, consequently, our team should be better and have a chance to win it all in Seattle next year."

The Heels didn't win it all. They went 28–3, but lost to Indiana in the regional semifinals of the NCAA tournament. Still, Jordan won the Naismith Award as the college basketball. player of the year. He was convinced it was because of what he had learned from Smith, whom he later called "my mentor, my teacher, my second father."

"He was the perfect guy for me," Jordan wrote. "He kept me humble, but he challenged me. He gave me confidence by giving me compliments when he thought I needed them.... [He] made it fun to learn."

Center Sam Bowie was drafted by the Portland Trail Blazers despite a history of injuries.

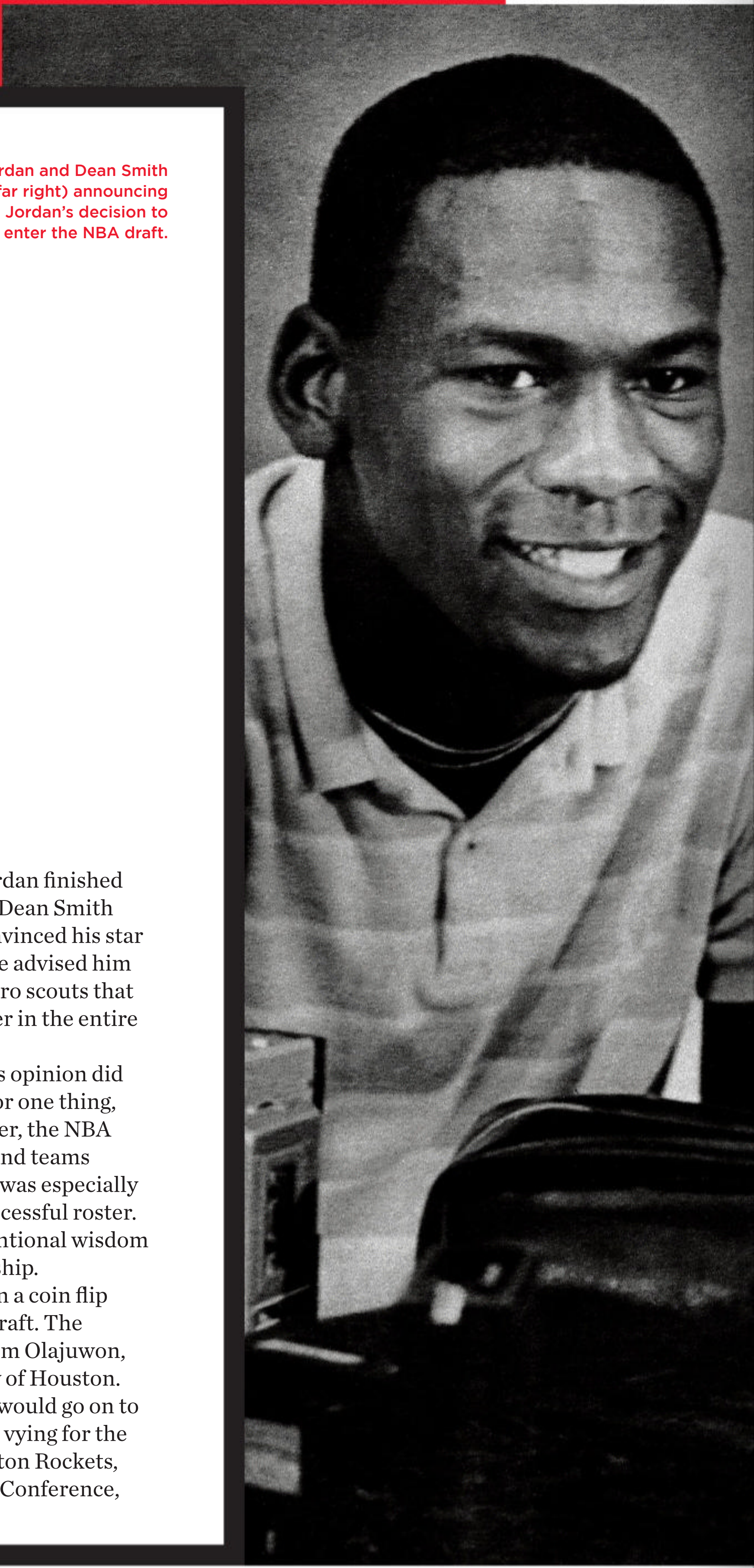
CHAPTER 3

Yes, Sam Bowie

WHY THE PORTLAND TRAIL BLAZERS PASSED ON JORDAN IN THE 1984 NBA DRAFT

CHAPTER 3

THE ROOKIE SEASON



Jordan and Dean Smith (far right) announcing Jordan's decision to enter the NBA draft.

B

BY THE TIME MICHAEL Jordan finished his junior season, Tar Heels coach Dean Smith had seen enough. Smith was so convinced his star pupil was ready for the NBA that he advised him to leave school early. He also told pro scouts that Jordan was the best available player in the entire upcoming draft.

Smith was well respected, but his opinion did not make Jordan the top choice. For one thing, Smith clearly had a bias. For another, the NBA was very much a big man's league and teams favored size over athleticism. This was especially true when it came to building a successful roster. Without a dominant center, conventional wisdom said, you couldn't win a championship.

That's why so much was riding on a coin flip conducted one month before the draft. The consensus top prospect was Hakeem Olajuwon, a 7-foot center from the University of Houston. (The the Nigerian-born Olajuwon would go on to be a Hall of Famer.) The two teams vying for the right to choose him were the Houston Rockets, last-place finishers in the Western Conference,

CBS

KENTUCKY
31
GEORGETOWN
33
25

Bowie (left, 31) in action against Patrick Ewing (33) and Georgetown in 1984.

The other top center in the 1984 draft was Hakeem Olajuwon (35) of Houston.

and the Portland Trail Blazers. The Blazers held the pick that had previously belonged to the Indiana Pacers, the last-place finishers in the East.

The Houston Rockets won the toss, chose Olajuwon, and eventually won back-to-back NBA titles with him in 1994 and ’95. This left the Blazers with the second pick and a choice to make. In hindsight, their decision to select Kentucky center Sam Bowie has gone down in history as a colossal mistake. But, at the time, it made sense.

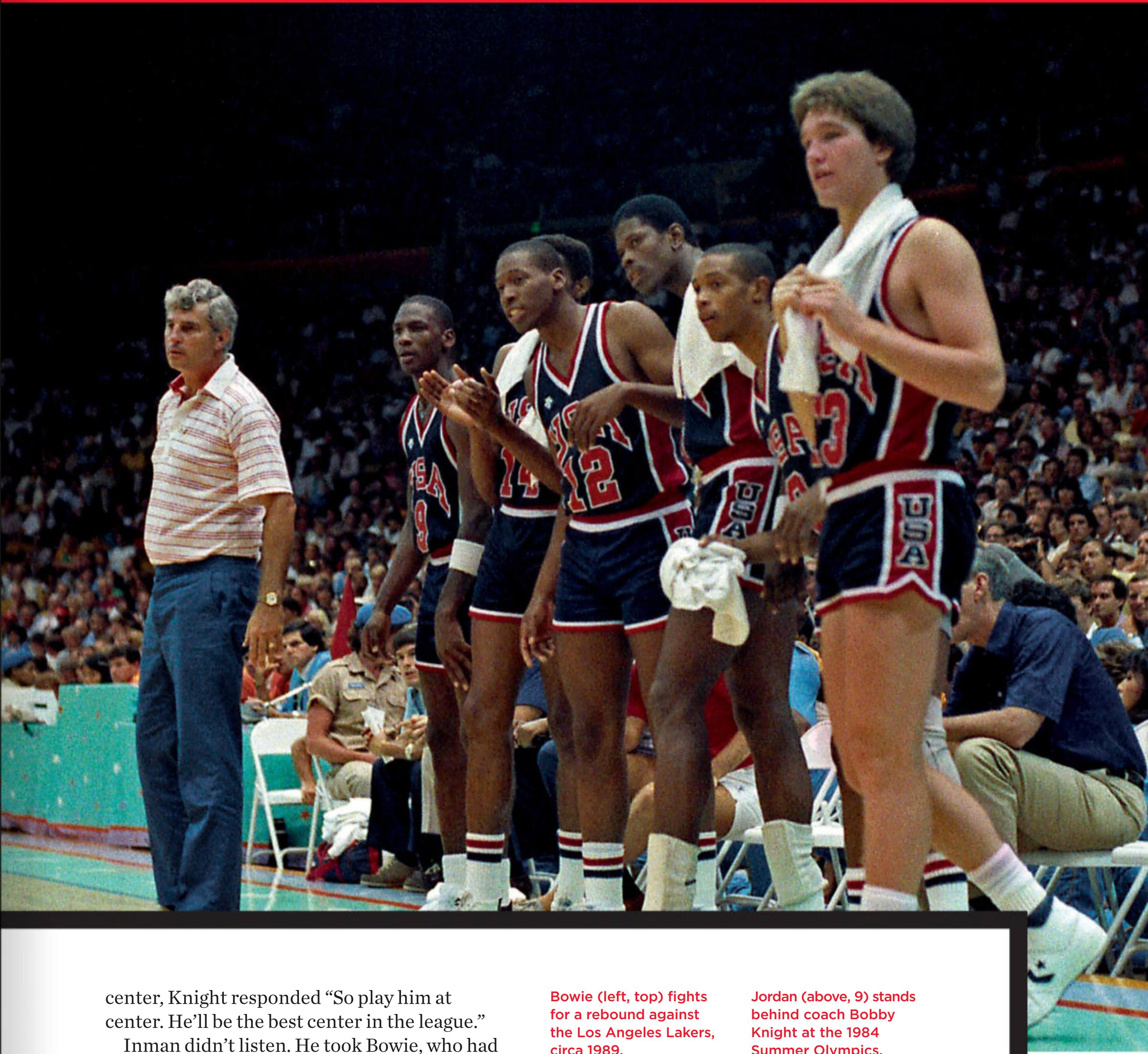
The Blazers felt they were set at guard, with All-Star Jim Paxson (the older brother of future Jordan teammate John Paxson) and Olajuwan’s former Houston teammate, Clyde Drexler, whom Portland had drafted in 1983. The Blazers didn’t need another shooting guard and thought the 7-foot-1 Bowie might put them over the top.

Still, Portland general manager Stu Inman and coach Jack Ramsay also ignored some signs that might have altered NBA history. Bowie had missed two full seasons at Kentucky with a stress fracture in his left shinbone. As a result, some teams—including the Bulls—didn't even have him on their draft boards. "I wouldn't even consider Bowie, because our doctor had red-flagged him," Rod Thorn, Chicago's GM at the time, told The Athletic in 2020. "So he wasn't even in consideration for me."

Meanwhile, Bobby Knight, the renowned coach at Indiana, was doing his best to try to talk his good friend Inman into drafting Jordan with the second pick. Knight had coached Jordan at the 1984 Olympic trials and had also scouted Jordan in the 1984 NCAA Tournament.

Knight raved about Jordan in a press conference that year, saying "in the categories of competitiveness, ability, skill and then athletic ability, he's the best athlete, he's one of the best competitors, he's one of the most skilled players. That to me makes him the best basketball player that I've ever seen play."

When Inman told Knight that he wouldn't draft Jordan because the Blazers needed a



center, Knight responded "So play him at center. He'll be the best center in the league."

Inman didn't listen. He took Bowie, who had a solid rookie season, averaging 10.0 points and 8.6 rebounds in 76 games. But, in his second year, his old leg injuries returned. He played in just 63 games over the next four seasons before the Blazers traded him to the New Jersey Nets.

The Bulls, of course, reaped the benefits. Thorn insisted the only player he would have selected over Jordan was Olajuwon. In fact, the GM rejected several trade offers for his No. 3 pick, including a strong one from the

Bowie (left, top) fights for a rebound against the Los Angeles Lakers, circa 1989.

Jordan (above, 9) stands behind coach Bobby Knight at the 1984 Summer Olympics.

> *"Had Sam stayed healthy, he was a can't-miss. What Jack did was right. All of us at the time would have done the same thing."*

Bowie (on crutches) played 76 games as a rookie before his old leg injuries returned.

Dallas Mavericks that included All-Star Mark Aguirre. There were some in Chicago who wanted to deal. They thought it would be better for the Bulls to trade down and, yes, draft a center. But Thorn was fixated on Jordan and made a concerted effort to tune those voices out.

"Rod and I jokingly made a pact the day before the draft that if anybody came in from the ownership group to try to convince us otherwise, we were going to lock them out of the room until the pick was made," said former Bulls scout Mike Thibault. "Or lock them in a closet if need be."

There was no need, though. Jordan was destined for Chicago.

As for the Blazers, there were no regrets—at least not publicly. Even NBA executives outside the organization understood why they'd gone with Bowie. Bill Fitch, then coach of the Rockets, told the *Chicago Tribune* in 2007, "If you asked [23] teams then if anyone looked at [Portland's] need, it was a Sam Bowie. Had Sam stayed healthy, he was a can't-miss. What Jack did was right. All of us at the time would have done the same thing."

Years later, Inman also admitted to the *Palm Beach Post* that he'd scouted Jordan, but didn't see the player he would become. "I knew Michael Jordan," he said. "I spent that summer with Bobby Knight and that Olympic team, and I can't say I saw that greatness that would manifest itself."

And he wasn't alone. Harry Glickman was a member of Portland's operations staff in 1984. In 2012, during an interview with *The Oregonian*, he played out a different what-if scenario. "If you look back at the draft," Glickman said, "if we hadn't selected [Bowie], we wouldn't have selected Jordan. We probably would have gone with Charles Barkley."

CHAPTER 4

Sweet Home, Chicago

BEFORE JORDAN ARRIVED, THE WINDY CITY WAS NOT KNOWN FOR BASKETBALL

Bulls swingman Jerry Sloan watches from the bench at Chicago Stadium, circa 1970.

BULLS

PHILA
21
PHILA
20
BULLS
5
PHILA
Wilson Official

PHILA
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BULLS
17

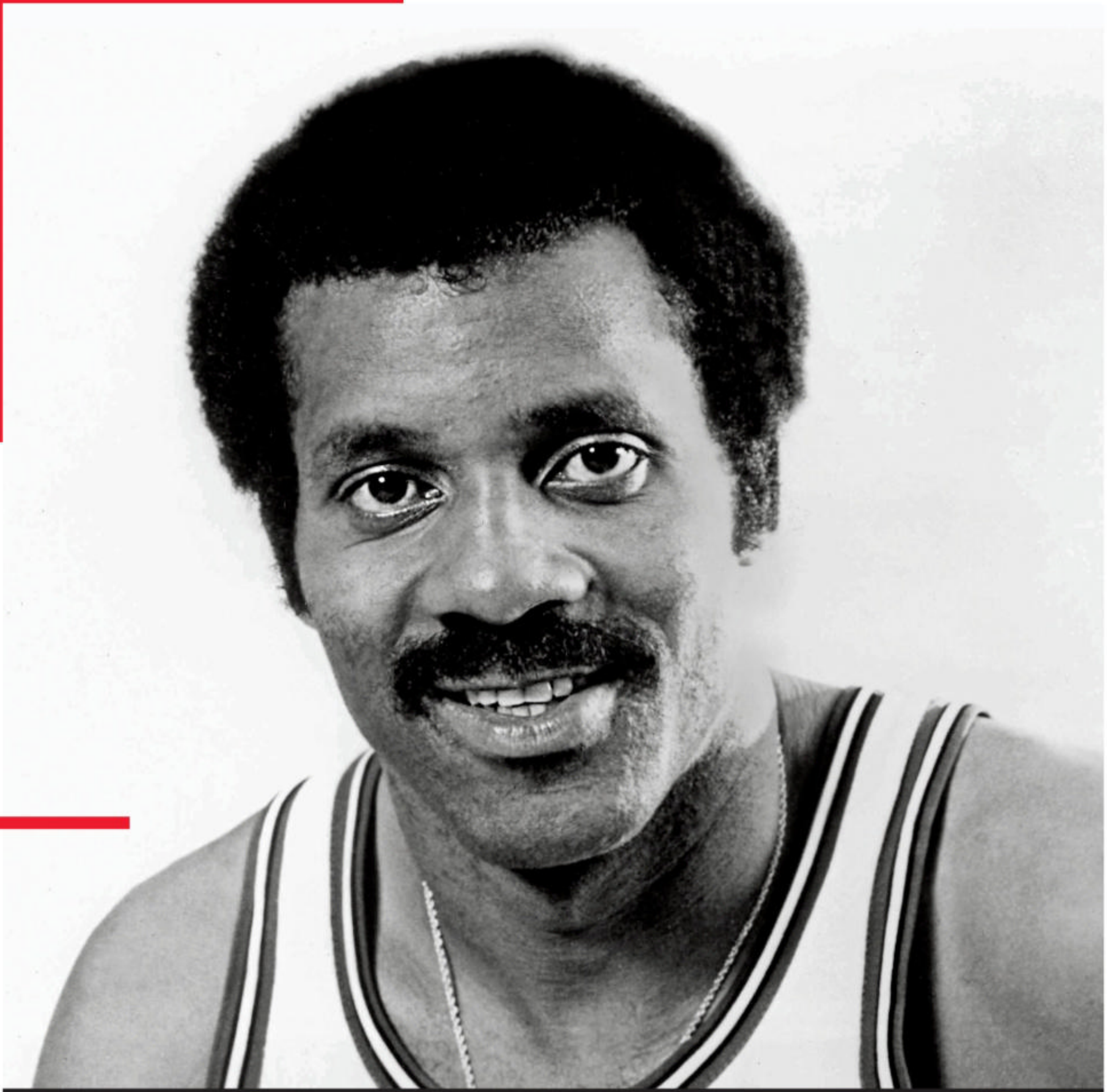
Bulls guard Guy Rodgers (5) drives past 76ers center Wilt Chamberlain on Jan. 4, 1967.

T

THE NBA'S EXPANSION era spanned the years 1966 to 1980, when 14 of the current 30 teams joined the league. It began in '66 with the Bulls—the latest team to attempt to make pro basketball work in Chicago.

Prior to the Bulls, Chicago fielded the Bruins of the American Basketball Association, as well as the American Gears and the Blackhawks. (There were also the Stags in the Basketball Association of America in the 1940s.) None of these teams was able to survive in the Midwest city, and many locals were skeptical that the pattern would change. "For the third time in its roller-coaster existence, the NBA will attempt to put major league basketball in Chicago," wrote Robert Logan in the *Chicago Tribune*. "As a stronghold of big league baseball, football and hockey, Chicago has proven that it will pay handsomely to see the pros. Basketball? That's another story.... Chicago, it has been said, just isn't a basketball town."

From the jump, the Bulls looked to change history, going 33–48 in their first year of existence, the best record ever for an NBA



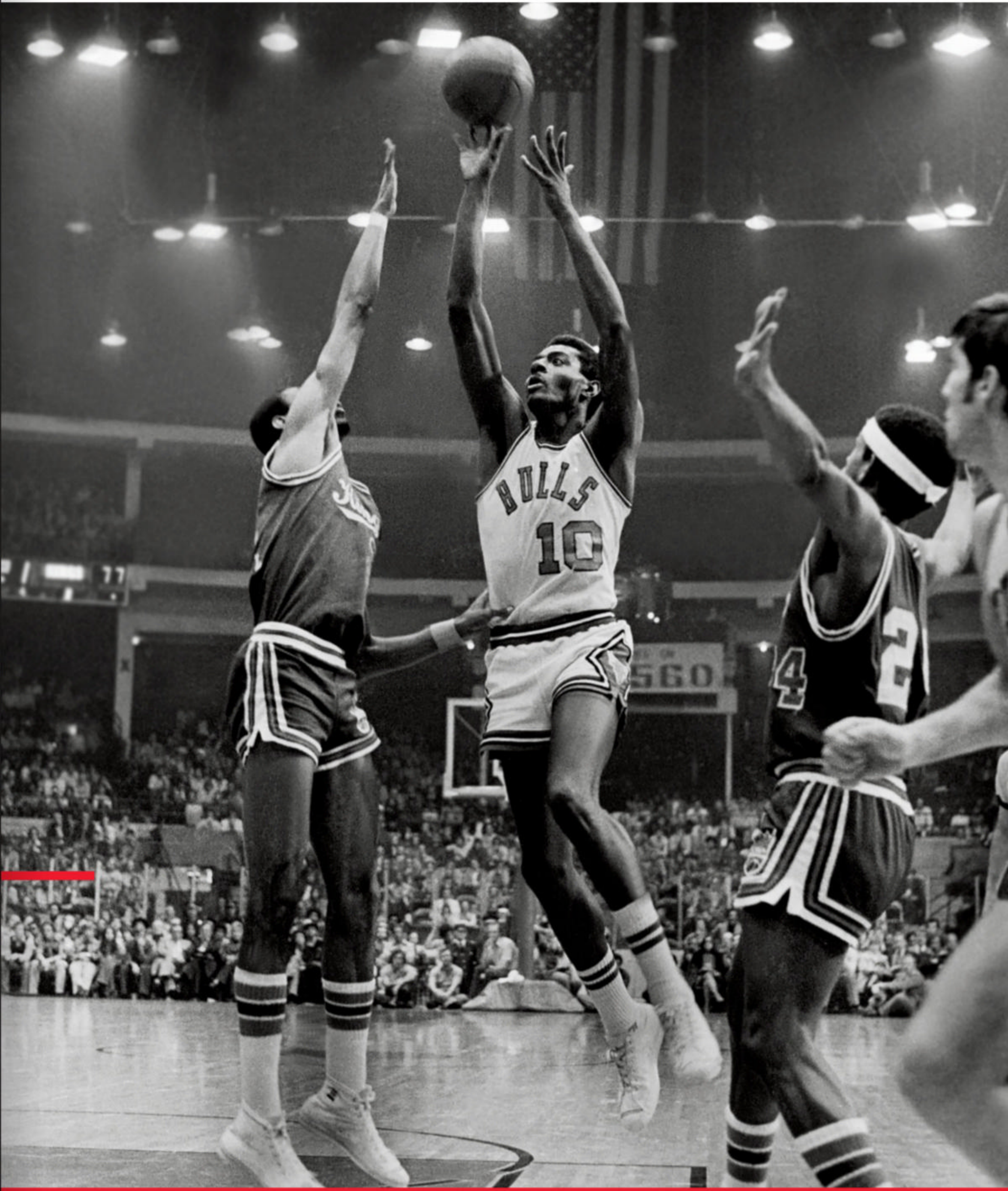
expansion team at the time. Still, the citizens of Chicago didn't really care. The Bulls averaged 4,772 fans per game at home. The people that ran the team's arena, the Chicago Amphitheater, decided they could generate more business hosting conventions. As a result, the Bulls were booted out, forcing them to stage a playoff game at the crumbling Chicago Coliseum.

The next season, the Bulls played a home game in front of only 891 people. In 1969–70, they played eight home games in Kansas City.

Chet Walker (above) was a star for the Bulls during their glory years in the early 1970s.

Forward Bob Love (right, 10) releases a shot during a game at Chicago Stadium.

But things began to change in 1969 with the hiring of 29-year-old general manager Pat Williams. With a team built around Bob Love, Chet Walker and Jerry Sloan (and, beginning in 1971–72, Norm Van Lier), the Bulls won 50 games every season from 1970–71 to '73–74, and reached the Western Conference finals in 1974 and '75.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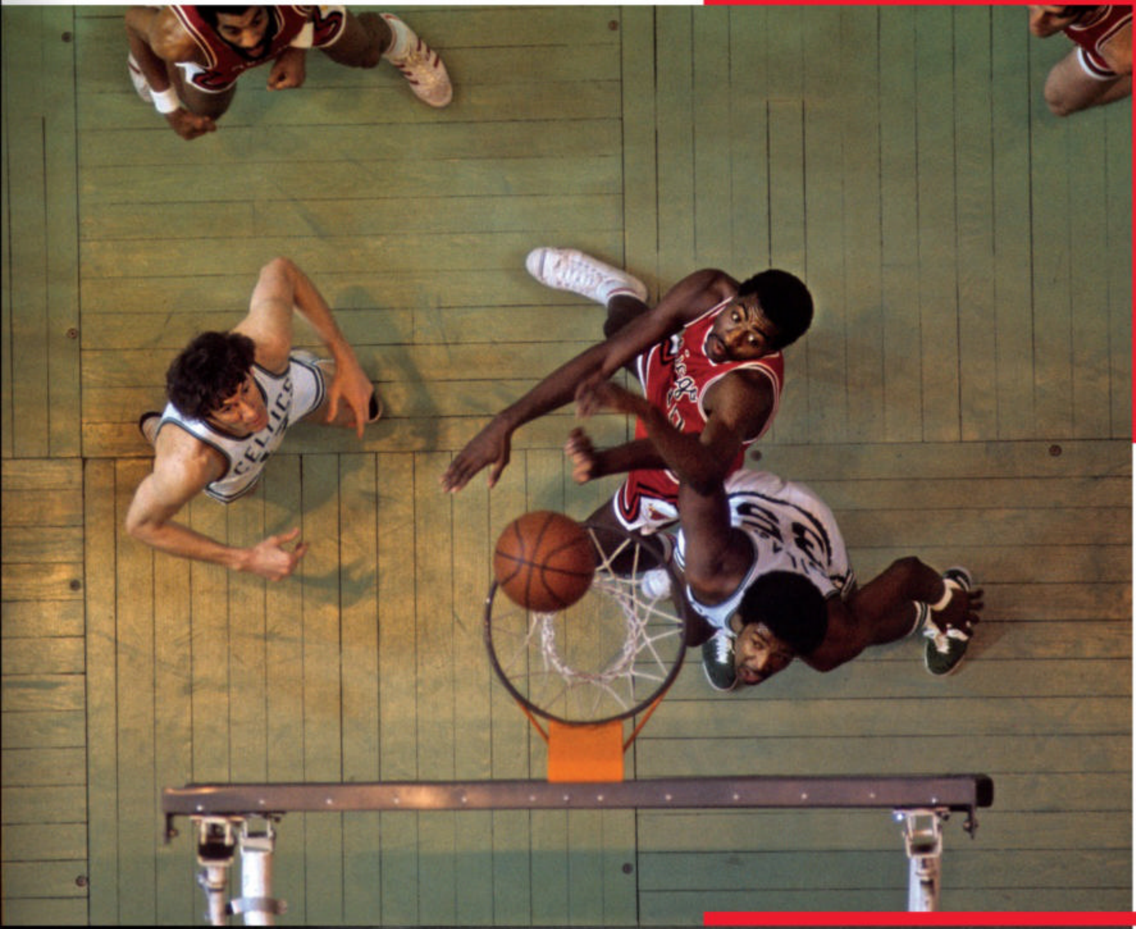
CELTICS
33



Larry Bird (33) drives around the Bulls' David Greenwood on April 12, 1981.

Love (above, in red) getting boxed out by the Boston Celtics on March 28, 1975.

Dick Motta (left) coached Chicago from 1968 until he was fired in 1976.

Bulls general manager Rod Thorn (near right) with Michael Jordan on Sept. 12, 1984.

Until the arrival of Michael Jordan in 1984, that had marked the apex of pro basketball in Chicago. It ended after Williams was ousted in a power struggle with coach Dick Motta, who wanted to be the GM, too. The results were disastrous. Motta feuded with his players. Walker retired. Love and Van Lier staged lengthy holdouts. And the Bulls ended up winning only 24 games in 1975–76, which led to Motta being fired.

Over the next nine seasons, the Bulls cycled through eight coaches. Following a last-place finish in 1978–79, Chicago was a coin flip away from possibly changing its fortunes. Instead, the Bulls lost out to the Los Angeles Lakers, who held the No. 1 pick in the NBA draft. As a result, the Bulls took UCLA forward David Greenwood with the second pick after the Lakers had chosen Michigan State's Earvin "Magic" Johnson.

The 1983–84 Bulls were led by general manager Rod Thorn and head coach Kevin Loughery. They went 27–55 during the regular season, including losses in 14 of their last 15 games. Thorn and Loughery ended up getting fired together in 1985—but not before bringing Jordan to Chicago.

"He was a tremendous athlete with a strong body that looked like it was going to get better," Thorn said in 2009. "He was competitive, and a fair shooter. Good ball handler, though not a great one... and a good defensive player. His shooting was what we were concerned with. We didn't know what kind of shooter he was going to turn out to be."

Given the state of the franchise at the time, it's not shocking that Thorn wasn't yet expecting greatness. But it didn't take long for Chicago to realize that Jordan was different. On the first day of training camp, Thorn received a phone call from assistant coach Bill Blair: "He said to the effect, and I'm cleaning this up a little, 'Boy, you didn't make a mistake this year!'"

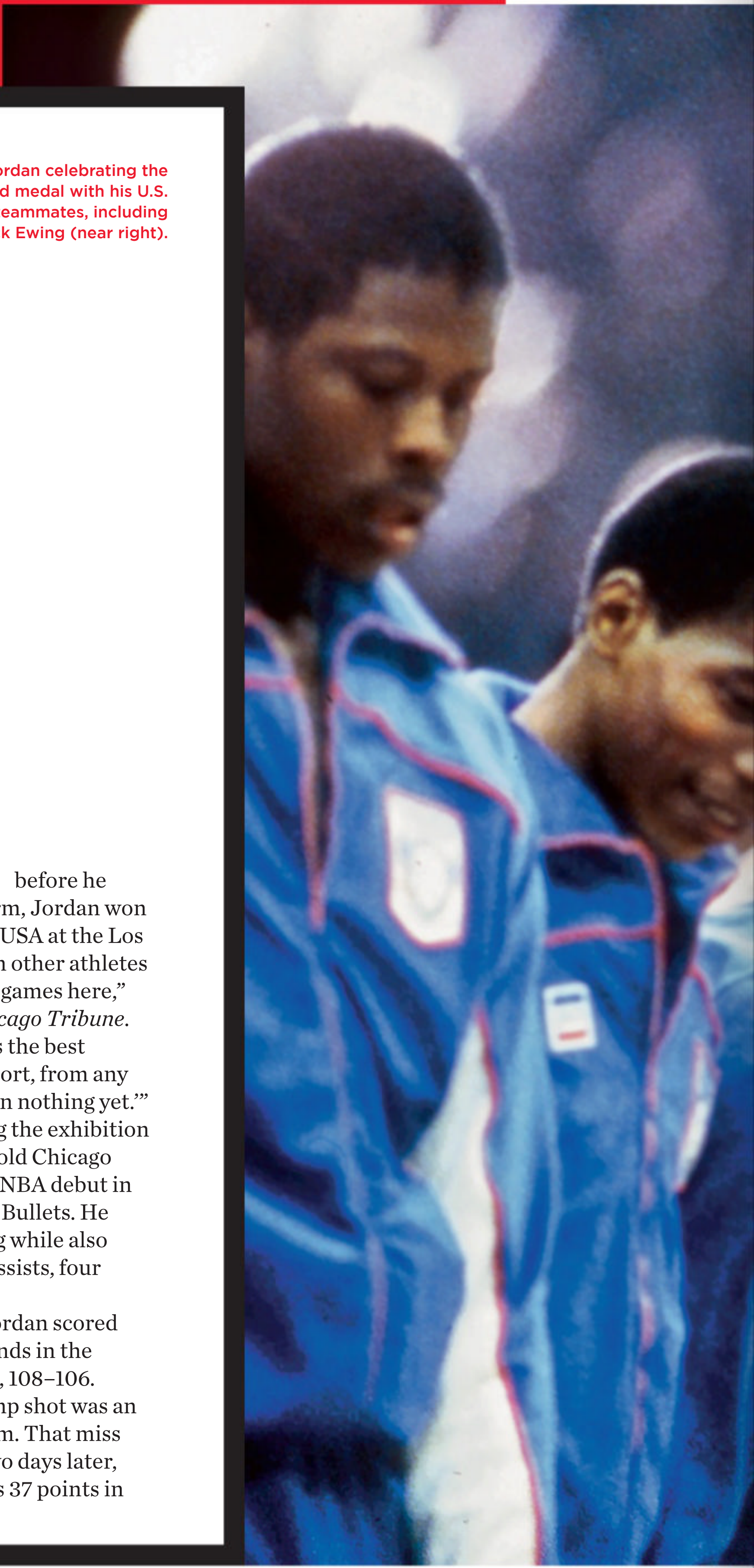
NBA

As a rookie, Michael Jordan was already the biggest star to ever play for the Bulls.

CHAPTER 5

The Season

AS A ROOKIE, JORDAN WAS A SENSATION—AND A GAME-CHANGER



Jordan celebrating the gold medal with his U.S. teammates, including Patrick Ewing (near right).

I

IN THE SUMMER OF 1984, before he first donned a Chicago Bulls uniform, Jordan won a gold medal as a member of Team USA at the Los Angeles Olympics. “I’ve talked with other athletes who’ve been watching some of our games here,” teammate Leon Wood told the *Chicago Tribune*. “A lot of them are saying Michael is the best athlete they’ve seen here, in any sport, from any country. I tell them, ‘They ain’t seen nothing yet.’”

The excitement only grew during the exhibition season. Then, on Oct. 26, 1984—at old Chicago Stadium—Jordan made his official NBA debut in a 109–93 win over the Washington Bullets. He scored 16 points on 5 of 16 shooting while also contributing six rebounds, seven assists, four blocks and two steals.

The next night, in Milwaukee, Jordan scored 21 points and had the ball in his hands in the final minute with the Bulls trailing, 108–106. His attempt at a game-winning jump shot was an air ball, never even touching the rim. That miss only added fuel to Jordan’s fire. Two days later, back in Chicago, he scored 22 of his 37 points in

Chicago
23
NBA

the fourth quarter as the Bulls beat the Bucks, 116–110.

"That's when I felt like I earned my stripes," Jordan said, "and the city of Chicago started to believe we could change the fortunes of the Bulls."

Jordan always set ambitious goals, but turning around the Chicago franchise sometimes seemed like an impossible task—even for him. Jordan had been accustomed to winning at North Carolina, and he did his best to bring a positive attitude to a locker room that had mostly known losing. Not all of the veterans appreciated their talented new star. Soon, there was budding jealousy over all the attention he was getting and the trust the coaches showed in him to control games.

It didn't help that the young Jordan simply didn't fit in. In the 1980s, drug use was rampant in the NBA, and Jordan was

Jordan lobbies a referee during a game in Washington, D.C., circa 1985 (left).

Jordan takes a break on the bench during a game in Atlanta, circa 1984 (above).

Jordan at the 1985 NBA All-Star Game with Eastern Conference coach K.C. Jones.

too focused on becoming a superstar to get caught up in the lifestyle of his older teammates. In the documentary *The Last Dance*, Jordan recalled a game on the road during his rookie season when he happened upon a gathering of his teammates in a hotel room.

"I walk in and practically the whole team was in there," he said. "And it was like things I've never seen in my life, you know, as a young kid. You got your lines over here. You got your weed-smokers over here. You got your women over here. So, the first thing I said, 'Look, man. I'm out.' Because all I can think about is, 'If they come and raid this place, right about now, I am just as guilty as everyone else that's in this room.' And from that point on, you know, I was more or less on my own."

The more Jordan focused on his game, the better he became. Before long, he settled into the off-guard position, which in the previous season had belonged to Quintin Dailey, the team's leading scorer in 1983–84. Within a matter of weeks, Dailey, who was already upset about being forced to come off the bench, was then moved to point guard, where he was clearly uncomfortable. He complained to the coaching staff about how Jordan was being treated. "I'm a player who likes to shine a little bit myself," he said, according to the *Chicago Tribune*.

"He couldn't accept Michael, honestly," coach Kevin Loughery told ESPN in 2010. "Michael came in and got all the attention, deservedly so."

Jordan remained undeterred, even if the atmosphere was difficult. Years later in an interview with *Slam* magazine, Jordan said his rookie season was a learning experience—but a strange one. "Do you really want to know what I learned? Not to be like [the vets]," he said. "I learned how to be a leader in all respects—just trying to lead the team out of losing all of the

8:22
GUEST
77
Chicago
23
BUCKS
24
Chicago

The hype and attention Jordan got as a rookie didn't sit well with some of his teammates.

time. The attitude was pretty acceptable here, of losing, so I was trying to break the mold."

At times, his efforts as a rookie were spectacular—so much so that fans voted him a starter on the 1985 Eastern Conference All-Star team. That experience wasn't easy either. The big story of All-Star Weekend was a "freeze-out" engineered by Detroit Pistons guard Isiah Thomas, who supposedly wanted to keep the ball away from the rookie to teach him a lesson in humility. Thomas has always denied this, but Jordan scored just seven points in 22 All-Star minutes.

What followed would soon become a familiar part of Jordan's career: revenge. A few days after the All-Star Game, Jordan and the Bulls played Thomas and the Pistons. That was when Chicago saw what number 23 was capable of when he was angry—49 points with 15 rebounds, five assists, and four steals in a 139–126 overtime victory.

Jordan went on to average 28.2 points per game for the Bulls as a rookie, shooting 51.5% from the field. He also averaged 6.5 rebounds and 5.9 assists. Most importantly, he helped a Bulls team that had won just 36.1% of its games over the previous three seasons to a record of 38–44 and its first playoff appearance in four years.

He won the NBA's Rookie of the Year award over Hakeem Olajuwon, with more than 73% of the votes. He even finished sixth in voting for NBA Most Valuable Player, receiving more first place votes than Moses Malone, Magic Johnson, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Isiah Thomas combined.

How good was Jordan as a rookie? Good enough for Larry Bird to offer this evaluation to the *Tampa Bay Times* on Feb. 9, 1985: "Without a doubt, Michael Jordan is the best guy I've ever played against. I used to think it was Moses [Malone]. Now there's no doubt in my mind it's Michael Jordan."

Michael Jordan in midflight during a game against the New Jersey Nets in 1985.

CHAPTER 6

The Phenomenon

JORDAN'S ROOKIE SEASON LIFTED THE ENTIRE NBA

23

INDI
UNIVE
NCAA
BASKETBALL
CHAMPIONS
1976
NIT
BASKETBALL
CHAMPIONS
1979
NCAA
BASKETBALL
CHAMPIONS
1981
INDIANA
13:58
VIS

IDIANA
IVERSITY
BIG TEN
BASKETBALL
CHAMPIONS
1983
USA
47
BASKETBALL

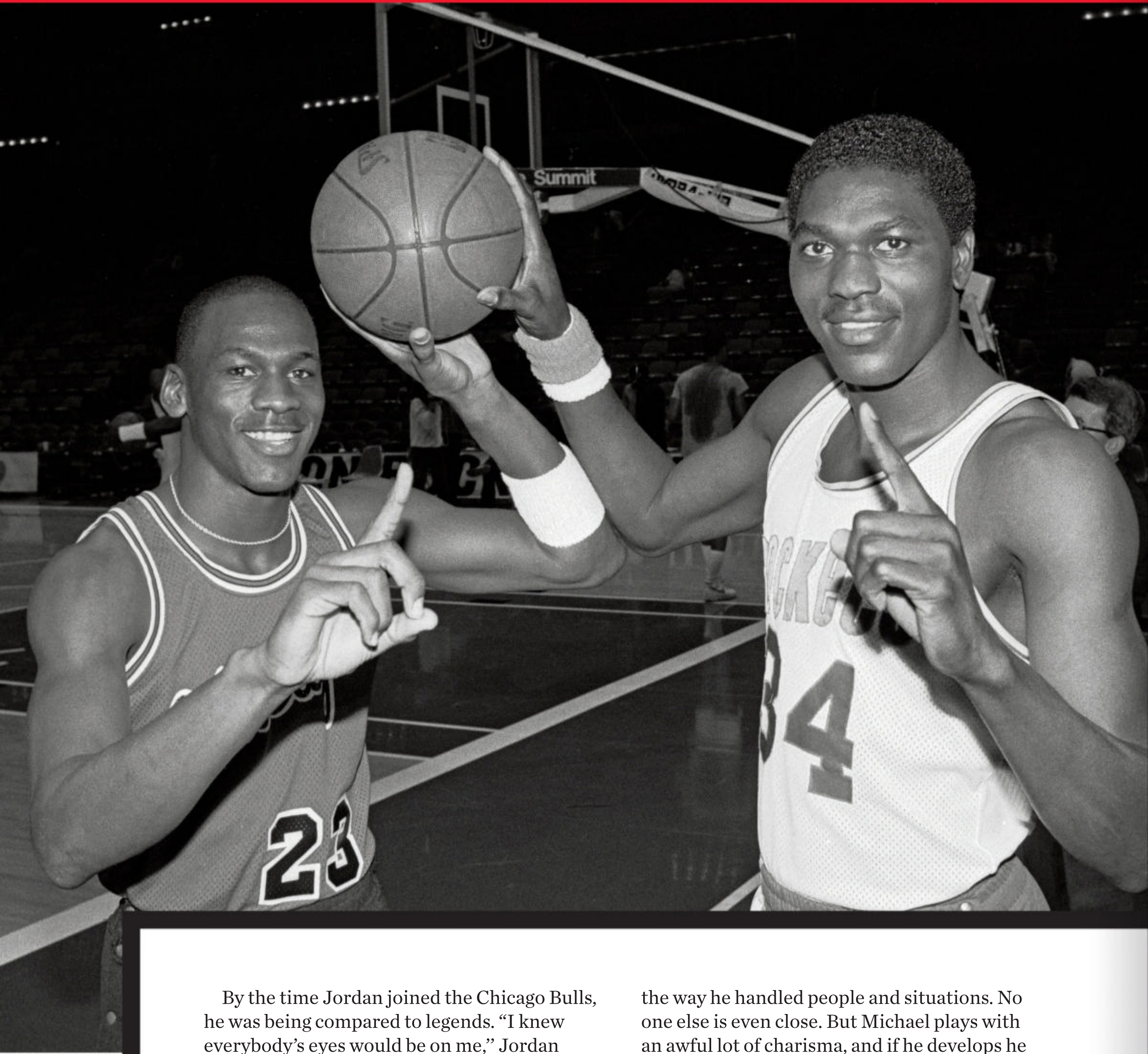
The buzz around Jordan began when he became the star of the U.S. Olympic team.

I

IT ALL STARTED WITH a spectacular summer. Twenty-one-year-old guard Michael Jordan was the star of the 1984 U.S. men's basketball team—the last to be comprised totally of amateur players—at the Olympic Games in Los Angeles. Jordan led Team USA to the gold medal, averaging 17.1 points in eight games, all double-digit U.S. victories.

"I can remember even at the trials there was a buzz any time Mike was playing," guard Steve Alford, a U.S. teammate of Jordan's, told Nevada SportsNet in 2020. "There were no fans there. There were just 77 [tryout players] in the building and every one of those 77 knew when MJ was playing, and you'd start glancing toward that court instead of paying attention to what you were doing."

"In two or three years, there will be a major controversy in the NBA," Team USA assistant coach George Raveling predicted that summer of '84. "It will concern how Michael Jordan was allowed to be drafted only third instead of first or second."

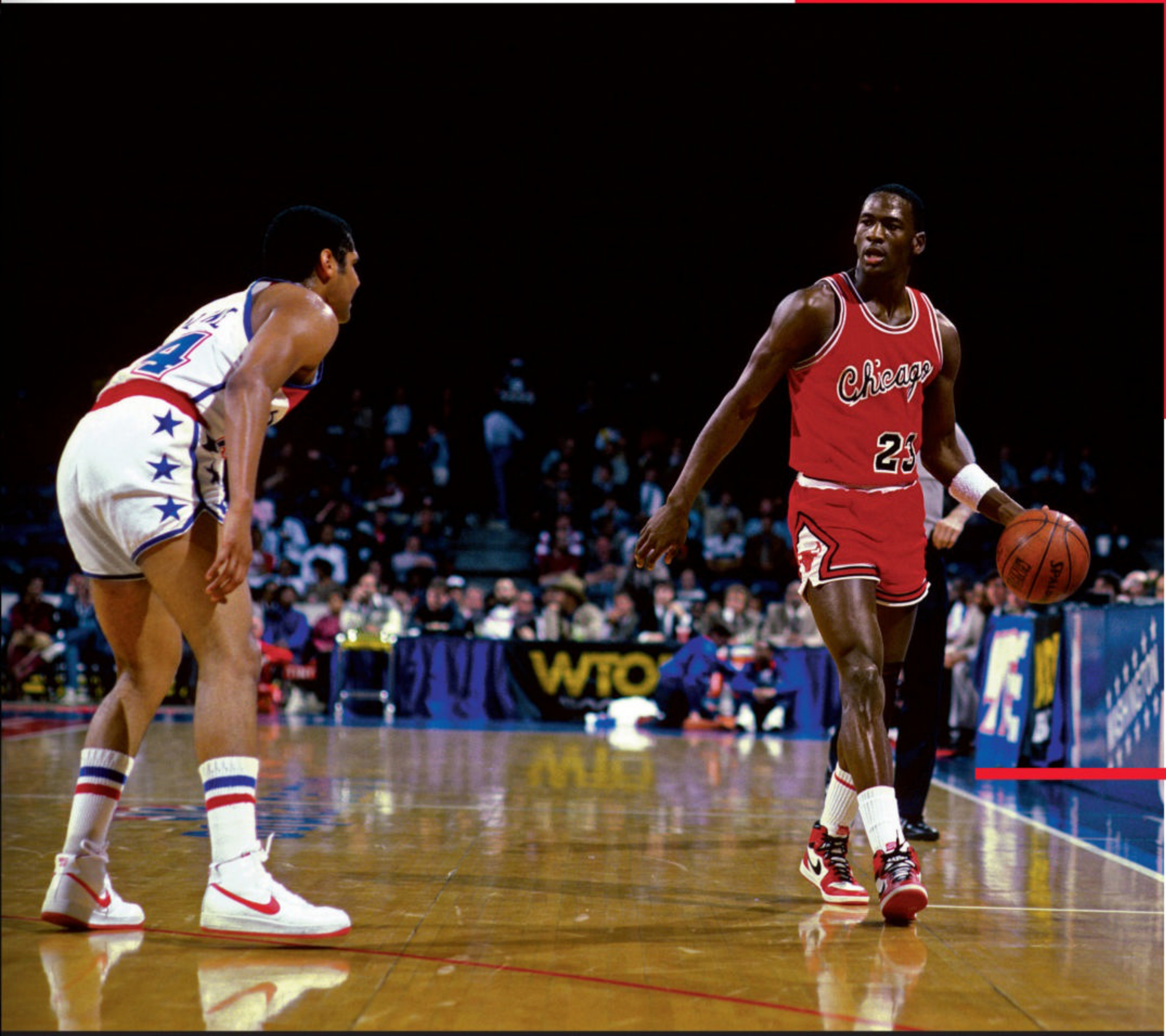


By the time Jordan joined the Chicago Bulls, he was being compared to legends. “I knew everybody’s eyes would be on me,” Jordan said after he scored 23 points in a preseason game against the New York Knicks at Madison Square Garden. “I’d been compared to Julius Erving and Jerry West and people wanted to see for themselves.”

“It’s hard in this day and age of athletics to compare anyone to Julius, on or off the court,” said Bulls coach Kevin Loughery, according to *The New York Times*. “[Erving] was unbelievable for an athlete of his stature, the way he handled people and situations. No one else is even close. But Michael plays with an awful lot of charisma, and if he develops he has a chance to be one of the top five draws in pro basketball.”

Loughery added, “I don’t think any player in a long time came into the league with this kind of hype. He’s got to produce immediately.”

He did. And everybody, everywhere took notice. Attendance for Bulls games at Chicago Stadium nearly doubled. The team averaged 11,602 fans per home game for the 1984–85 season—up from 6,103 the season before.



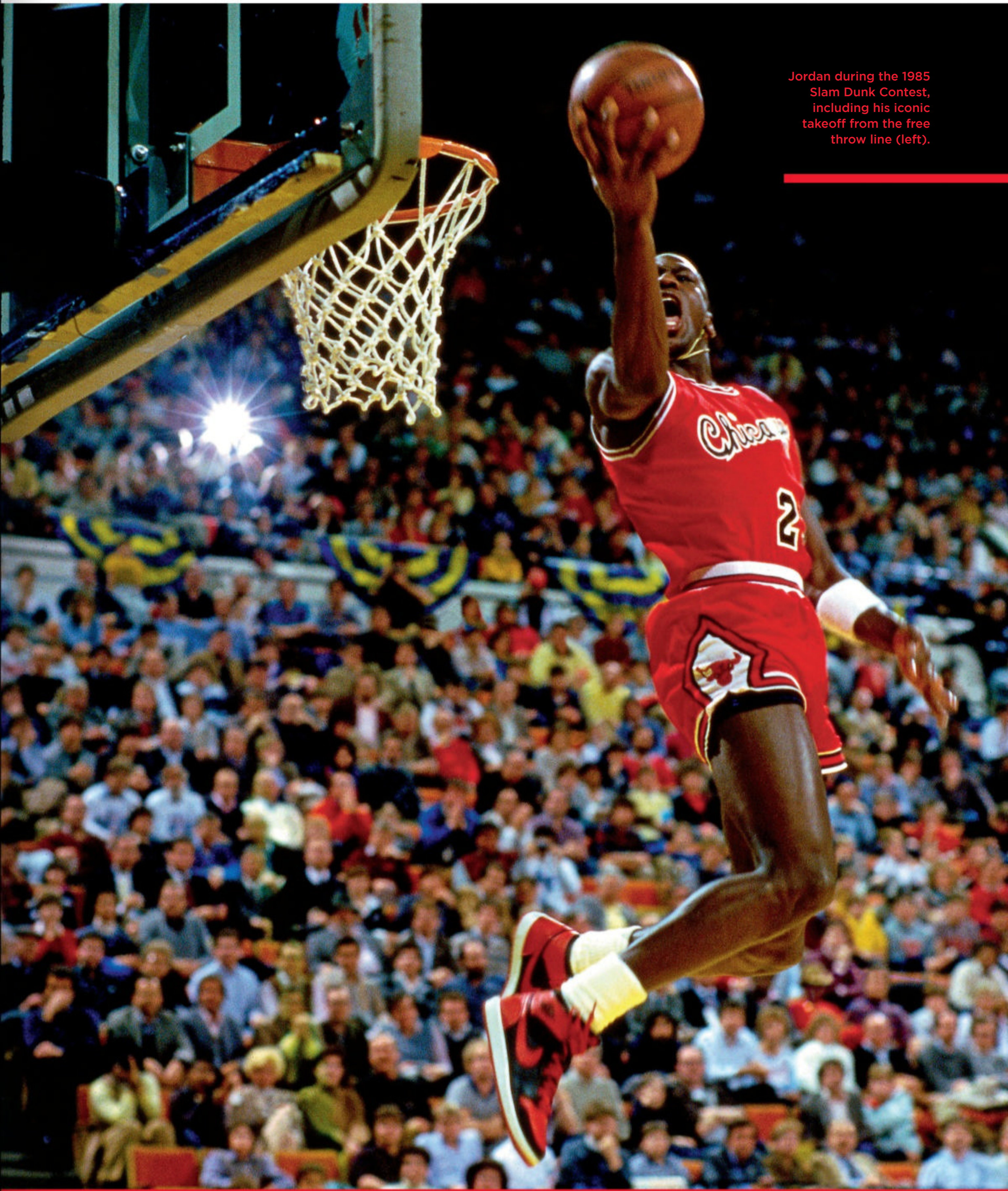
That translated roughly to an extra 225,000 tickets sold. And when Chicago hit the road, its games regularly sold out.

Meanwhile, ratings for Bulls games on WGN, a Chicago-area "superstation," exploded. Only 65 NBA games were scheduled for national television in 1984–85. Atlanta-area superstation WTBS had 55 of them, and 10 more were on CBS. Chicago was only supposed to appear once, on WTBS. CBS tried to get the league to change the schedule so that the Christmas Day game between Philadelphia and Detroit would be Philadelphia vs. Chicago

Jordan with Houston Rockets center Hakeem Olajuwon (34), the top pick in the 1984 draft.

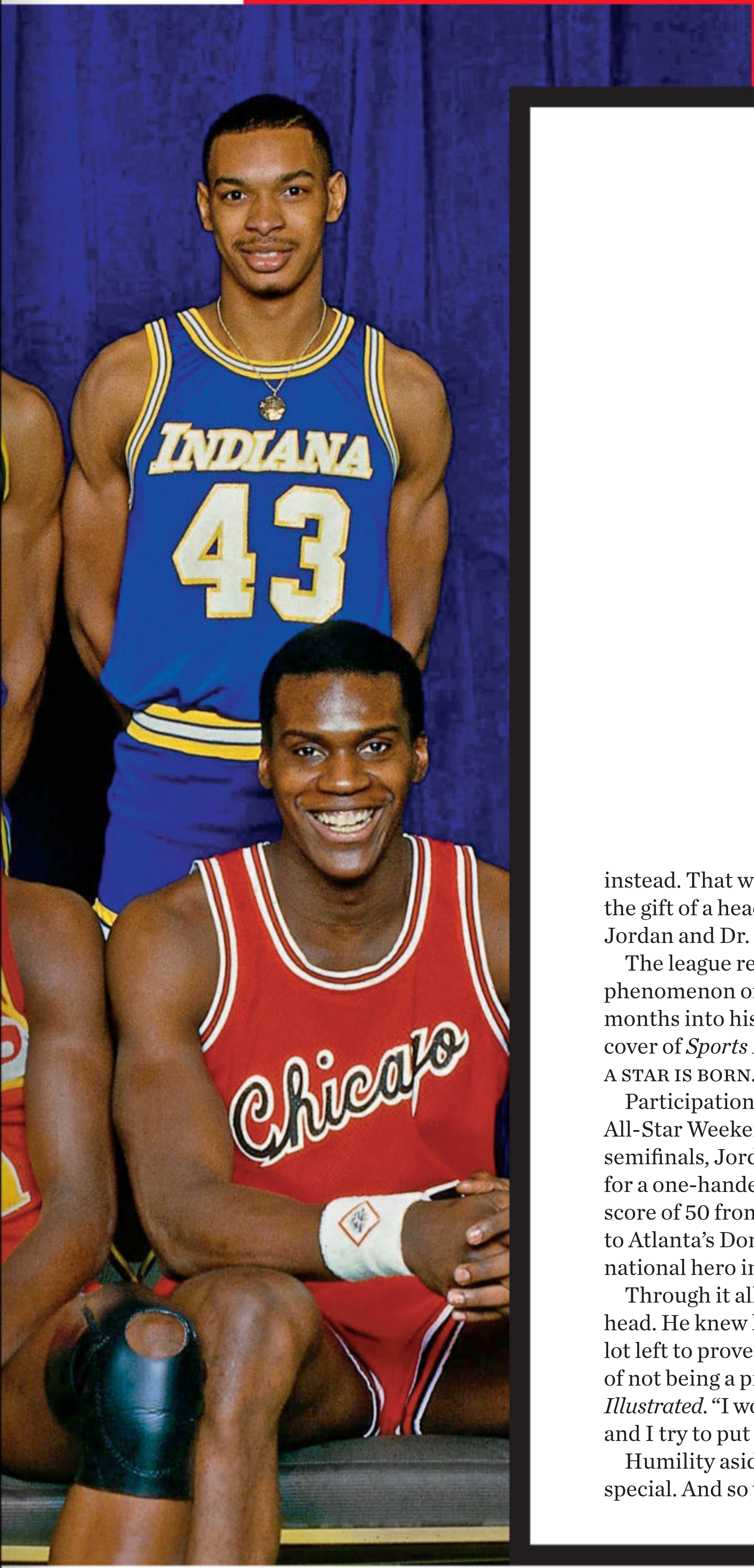
Jordan brings the ball up the court against the Washington Bullets, circa 1985 (above).

"I don't think any player in a long time came into the league with this kind of hype. He's got to produce immediately."



Jordan during the 1985 Slam Dunk Contest, including his iconic takeoff from the free throw line (left).

blazers
22
Chicago
UTAH
JAZZ
35
SIXERS
6
PHOENIX
22
SPALDING
Official Game Ball
NBA
Hawks
21



Jordan with the 1985 Slam Dunk Contest participants, including Clyde Drexler (22), Julius Erving (6) and winner Dominique Wilkins (21).

instead. That would have given the entire country the gift of a head-to-head matchup between Jordan and Dr. J.

The league refused this request, but the phenomenon of Jordan never cooled. Two months into his rookie season, he was on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* under the headline A STAR IS BORN.

Participation in the Slam Dunk Contest during All-Star Weekend added to the mania. In the semifinals, Jordan took off from the foul line for a one-handed dunk that earned a perfect score of 50 from the judges. Jordan lost the title to Atlanta's Dominique Wilkins, but became a national hero in the process.

Through it all, Jordan tried to maintain a level head. He knew he was still a rookie—one with a lot left to prove in the NBA. "I am very conscious of not being a prima donna," Jordan told *Sports Illustrated*. "I wouldn't want that if I were a veteran, and I try to put myself in our veterans' shoes."

Humility aside, there was no doubt Jordan was special. And so were his shoes.

The earliest Air Jordans were predominantly red and black. Jordan had wanted them to be blue.

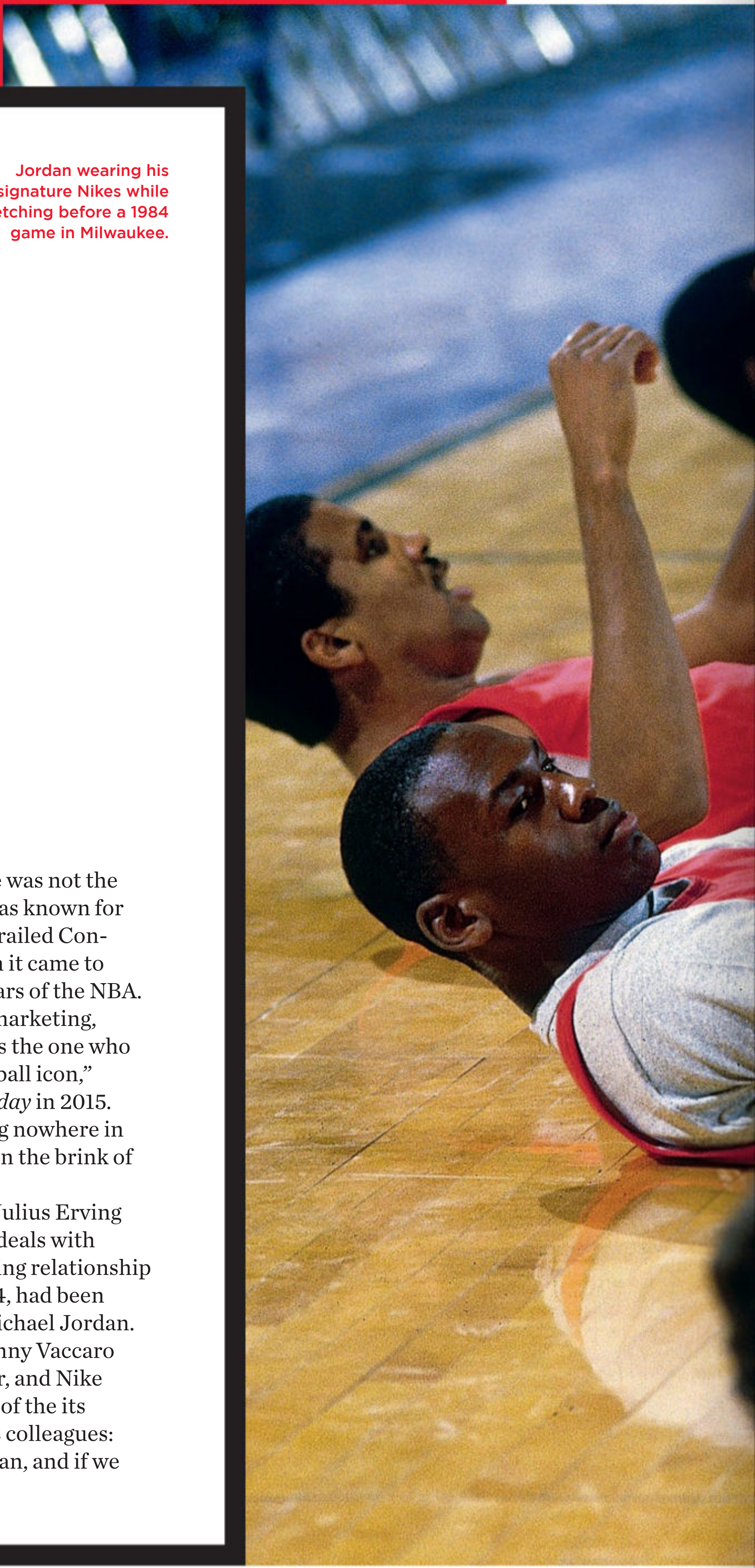
CHAPTER 7

The Shoes

THE AIR JORDAN SENSATION MADE NIKE A JUGGERNAUT

THE ROOKIE SEASON

CHAPTER 7



Jordan wearing his signature Nikes while stretching before a 1984 game in Milwaukee.

I

IN THE EARLY 1980S, Nike was not the first name in basketball shoes. It was known for running shoes and apparel, but it trailed Converse, Adidas and even Puma when it came to outfitting the best and brightest stars of the NBA.

Rob Strasser, Nike's director of marketing, saw this as an opportunity. "He was the one who decided that Nike needed a basketball icon," designer Peter Moore told *USA Today* in 2015. "He figured out that Nike was going nowhere in basketball, which at the time was on the brink of becoming a big, big market."

Larry Bird, Magic Johnson and Julius Erving were already tied to endorsement deals with Converse. But Strasser had a working relationship with agent David Falk, who, in 1984, had been signed to represent NBA rookie Michael Jordan.

Strasser and fellow marketer Sonny Vaccaro saw Jordan as a potential superstar, and Nike went all in on making him the face of the its basketball line. As Strasser told his colleagues: "If Jordan does what we think he can, and if we can execute, this can be big."

Chica
23
bullets
24

A pair of Jordan's shoes from his rookie season up for auction at Sotheby's (above).

Jordan (23) in action in 1985 against the Washington Bullets (right).

Nike cofounder and president Phil Knight poses with some Air Jordans (far right).

THE WORLD
NIKE
AIR

AIR JORDAN

In the shoe's first year of production, Nike sold $126 million worth of Air Jordans.

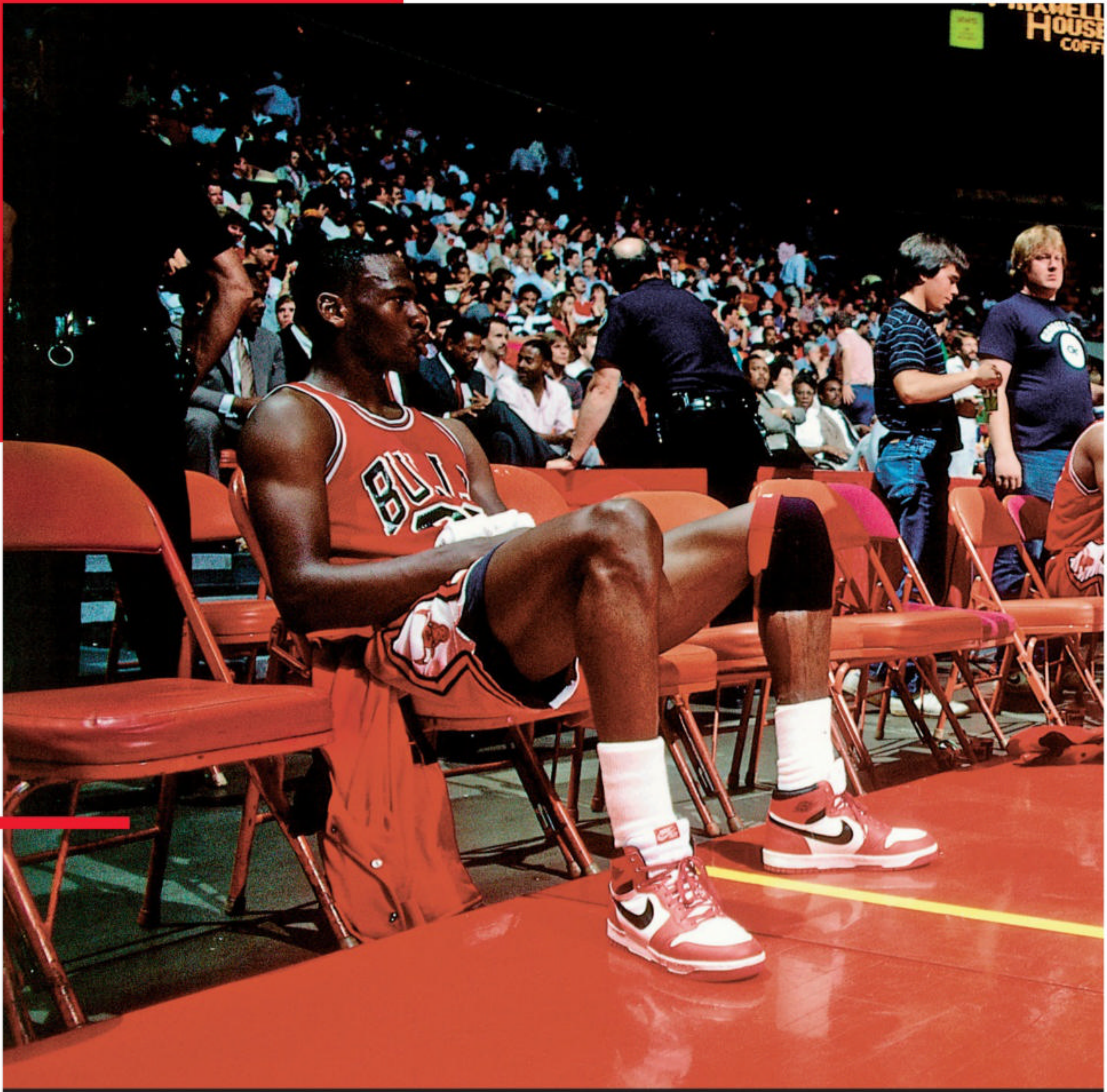
That was an understatement. The partnership between Jordan and Nike blossomed into one of the most successful and lucrative marketing deals the world has ever seen. Jordan—who initially wanted to sign with Adidas—received an unprecedented deal to join a company with a lot to prove and nothing to lose when it came to basketball footwear. The initial deal, which spanned five years, amounted to a $2.5 million contract that included a possible $7 million in stock options and 25% of the royalties for the sales of Jordan's signature brand of shoes—called "Air Jordan" at Falk's suggestion.

While Air Jordans were still in production, Jordan wore other Nike shoes—"Air Ships"—during his first preseason games. These were predominantly red and black (like the first Air Jordans), which was the color scheme of the Chicago Bulls.

NBA policy at the time required players' shoes to be at least 51% white. Jordan's shoes were only 23% white—and, reportedly, Jordan didn't even like the red-and-black color scheme. If Jordan had gotten his way, his shoes would have been blue. Even the Bulls worried that the shoes would make their rookie stand out too much.

To Nike, making Jordan and his shoes stand out was the whole point. "From a marketing point of view," Falk told *Sports Illustrated*, "the last thing we'd want is to have him look like everybody else."

There might have been a steep price to pay for being so different. About a week before the 1984–85 regular season began, the NBA threatened to fine Jordan $5,000 per game if he didn't conform to league rules. Nike spun that into gold. The first Air Jordan commercial included a voiceover that said, "On October 15, Nike created a revolutionary new basketball shoe. On October 18, the NBA threw them out of the game. Fortunately, the NBA can't keep you from wearing them."



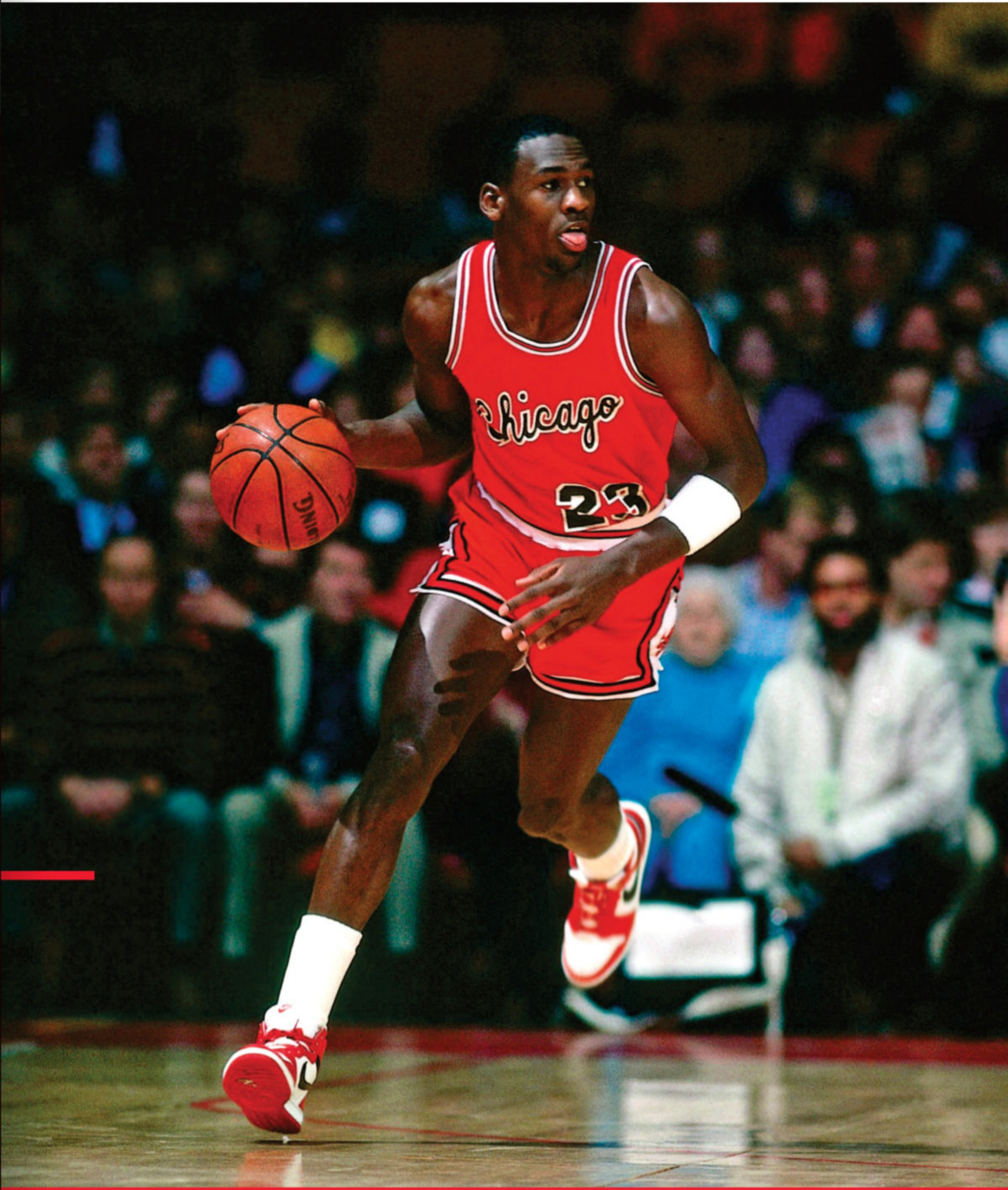
Jordan on the bench wearing his "legal" shoes during a game in Atlanta (above).

With his tongue out and Air Jordans on, Jordan brings the ball upcourt in 1985 (right).

In truth, Air Jordans were never actually "banned." Jordan didn't even wear them in a game until November. And when he did, Nike added white in the hopes of satisfying NBA rules. For years there has been a great debate over whether Jordan was ever actually fined. The facts didn't matter—the shoes were an instant sensation.

"Nike's expectation was at the end of year four they hoped to sell $3 million of Air Jordans," Falk said in the documentary *The Last Dance*. "In year one, we sold $126 million."

Jordan's name was not only on the hottest sneakers in the country, his face and athletic grace were being promoted coast to coast in commercials and advertisements. Nike did this because they were counting on Jordan to carry the company to greatness. But, in the beginning, Nike had given him a head start by setting expectations so high.



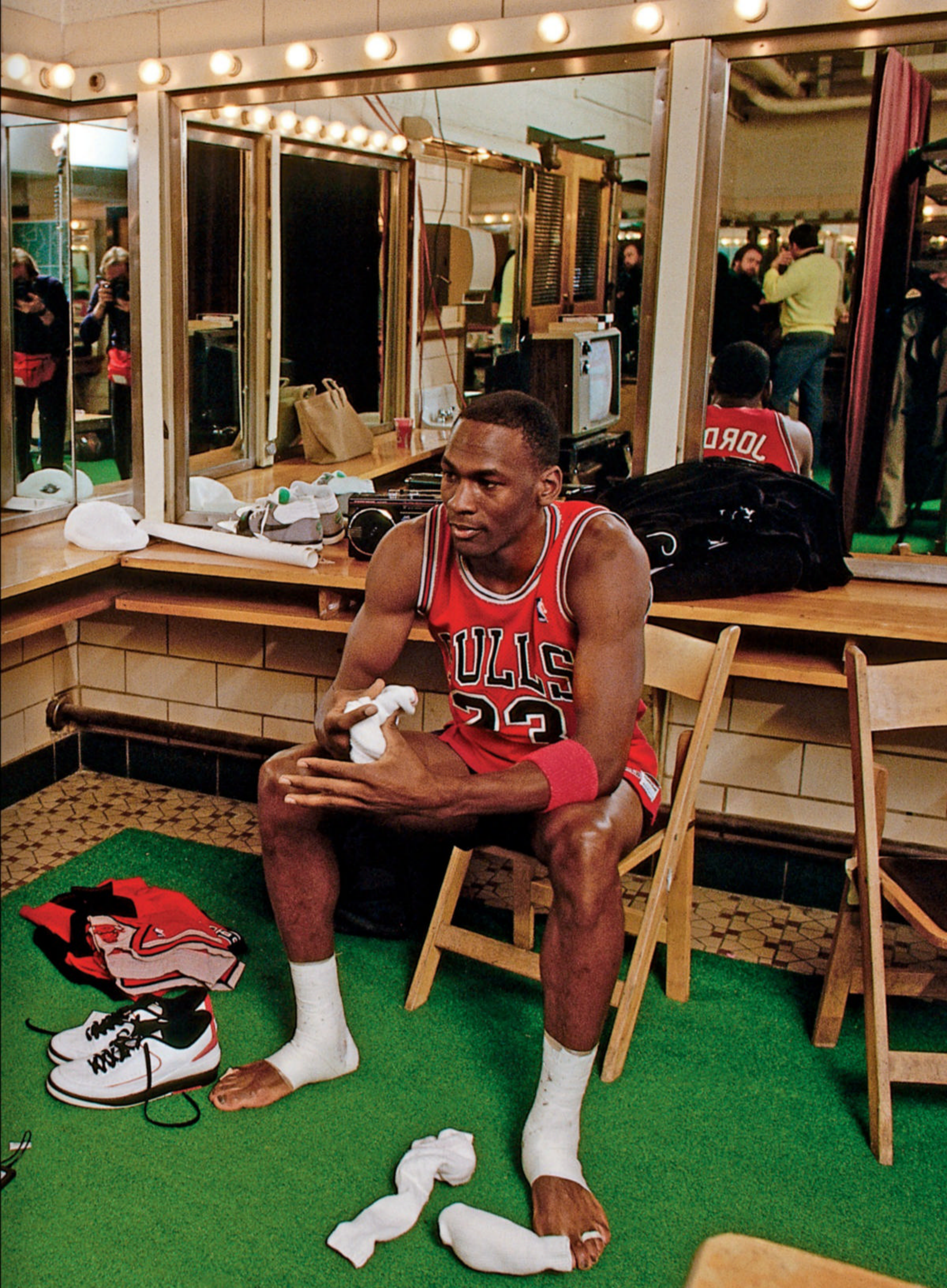
Chicago
23

Michael Jordan takes a seat in the locker room prior to a game in Milwaukee in 1988.

CHAPTER 8

The Frustrations

JORDAN'S SENSATIONAL ROOKIE SEASON WAS FOLLOWED BY YEARS OF UNFULFILLED EXPECTATIONS


BULLS
23

BULLS
23

Gatorade
Slam Dunk Championship

Jordan taking flight in the Slam Dunk Contest during 1988 All-Star Weekend in Chicago.

CHAPTER 8

J

JUDGED SOLELY BY individual achievement, the first six years of Michael Jordan's career were spectacular, with the exception of his second season, when he missed 64 games with a broken foot. On the court he dazzled the NBA, averaging more than 30 points a game. In 1988, he was named Defensive Player of the Year and Most Valuable Player.

It seemed like the young superstar could do it all. Except for one thing: He couldn't lead the Chicago Bulls to a world championship. And despite his ability to turn a losing franchise into a playoff contender, most of the blame fell on him.

It wasn't fair, but critics believed Jordan wasn't a team player. He took too many shots, they said. He didn't do enough to make his teammates better, they insisted. He was a star when it came to filling a highlight reel, but he wasn't a winner like Magic Johnson or Larry Bird.

"Early on, people were saying Michael didn't have a team mentality," Bird wrote in the book *When the Game Was Ours*. "That was because he didn't have a team."

The Bulls surrounding Jordan weren't very good in these years—and the organization wasn't stable. His first pro coach, Kevin Loughery, was dismissed after his rookie season. His second coach, Stan Albeck, lasted only one year before being fired.

The Bulls had a losing record —and were bounced in the first round of the playoffs—in each of Jordan's first three seasons. Jordan did what he could. He even returned from his foot injury in time for the 1986 playoffs and scored 63 points in a Game 2, double-overtime loss to the Boston Celtics.

It wasn't enough, and Jordan's frustration grew. "I'm taking these raps as a challenge just to get better and see that my team gets better," Jordan told *Sports Illustrated* in 1987. "But it's not as if I'm playing with a bunch of all-leaguers. What are the factors here? Are you telling me Kareem [Abdul-Jabbar] and James [Worthy] wouldn't be All-Stars without Magic? That [Kevin] McHale and [Dennis Johnson] wouldn't make it without Bird? Anybody who thinks that is a damn fool."

The turning point came in 1987. Jordan was coming off a spectacular campaign during

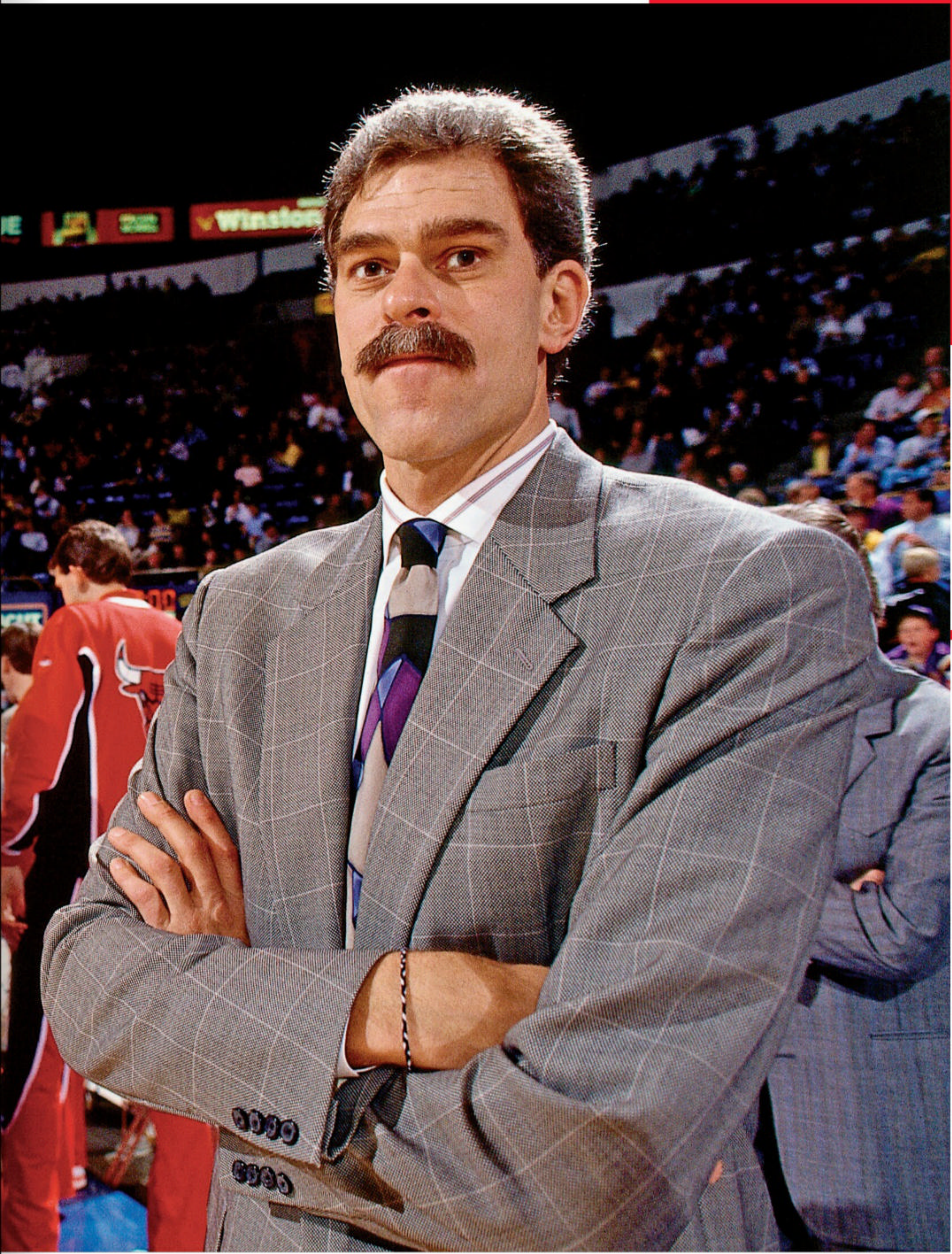
The Bulls' fortunes began to change after they made a trade for Scottie Pippen (33) in 1987.

which he'd averaged 37.1 points per game and became the only player other than Wilt Chamberlain to score 3,000 points in a season. The Bulls still won only 40 games and lost in the first round of the postseason. But that spring, Chicago engineered a draft-day trade to acquire Central Arkansas forward Scottie Pippen—who'd been taken by Seattle with the fifth selection—and then grabbed power forward Horace Grant with the 10th pick.

Now the team had talent at three positions, and the result was more regular-season wins—50 and 47 victories in each of the next

> *"I'm taking these raps as a challenge just to get better and see that my team gets better."*

The Bulls hired former NBA player Phil Jackson (in suit) as their coach in 1989.



THE ROOKIE SEASON

CHAPTER 8

Pippen (33) and Jordan in action against the Los Angeles Lakers in Game 1 of the 1991 NBA Finals.

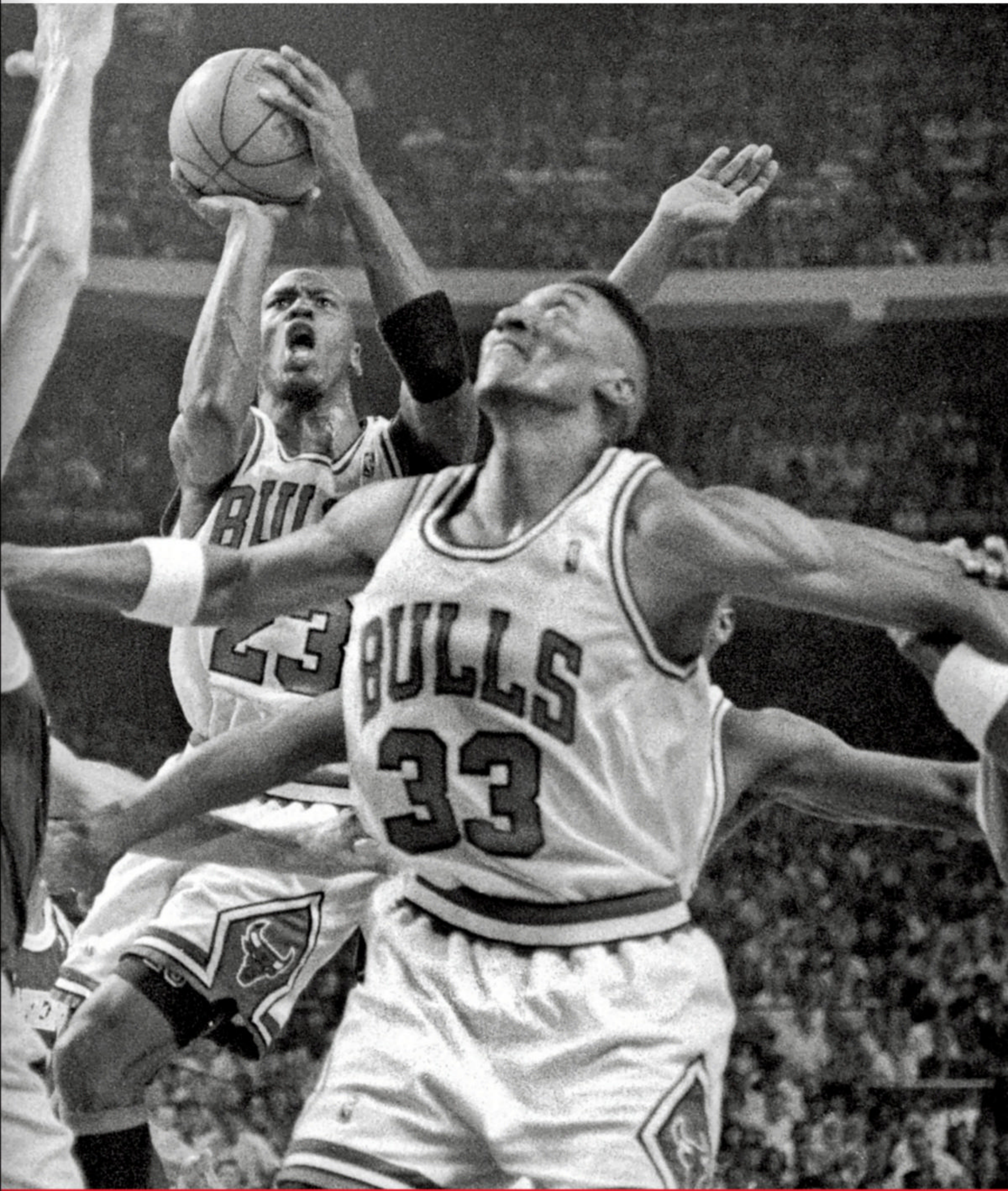
two seasons. And Chicago began to make deeper postseason runs. In 1988–89, the Bulls reached the Eastern Conference finals. In 1989–90, after Phil Jackson had replaced Doug Collins as coach, they won 55 games and made the conference finals again.

The only thing standing between Jordan and a shot at a world championship was the Detroit Pistons, the “Bad Boys” of the NBA. Detroit’s formula for stymying Chicago was simple—stop Jordan by any means necessary. The strategy worked so well it was even given a name: The Jordan Rules.

Chicago did eventually figure out a way to beat the Pistons, but for at least two seasons it seemed that Jordan might have reached his peak. Other players may have been satisfied by what he had accomplished in what was the first chapter of his NBA career. He was arguably the most popular player in the league and had turned his team around. No one could have expected more—but Jordan did, from himself and from the rest of the Bulls as well.

“When it came to comparisons, this is what always knocked me out of the top two players,” Jordan explained to *Playboy* magazine in a 1991 interview. “People would always say, ‘All these great plays and he’s never taken his team to a championship.’”

Not long after, Jordan cleared this final hurdle. And once he did, it happened over and over again.


BULLS
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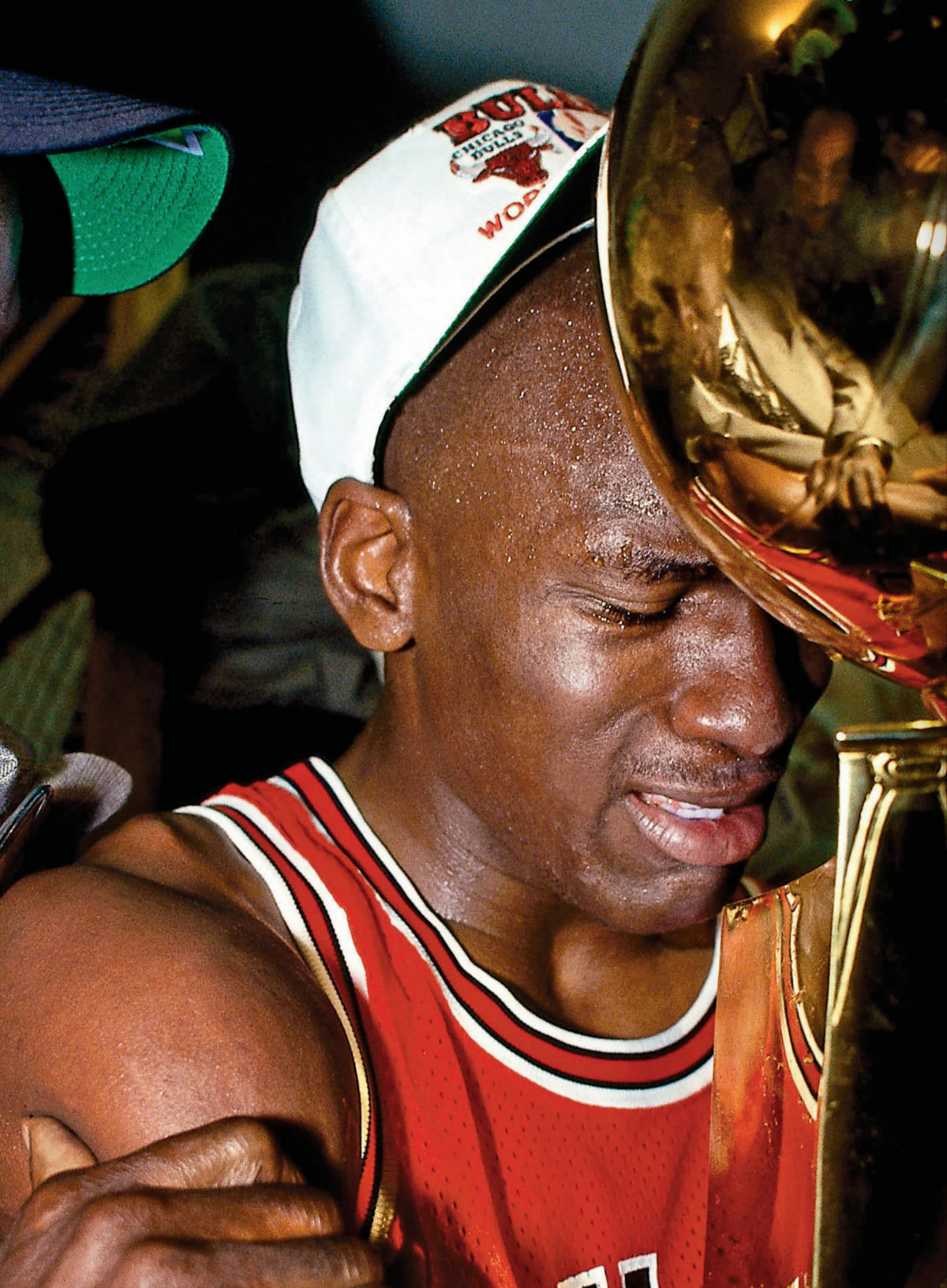
BULLS
33


BULLS
CHICAGO BULLS
WOR

Michael Jordan cries as he hugs the Larry O'Brien trophy after the Bulls won their first NBA title in 1991.

CHAPTER 9

The Legend

JORDAN WAS FUELED BY JUST ONE THING HIS ENTIRE CAREER—WINNING

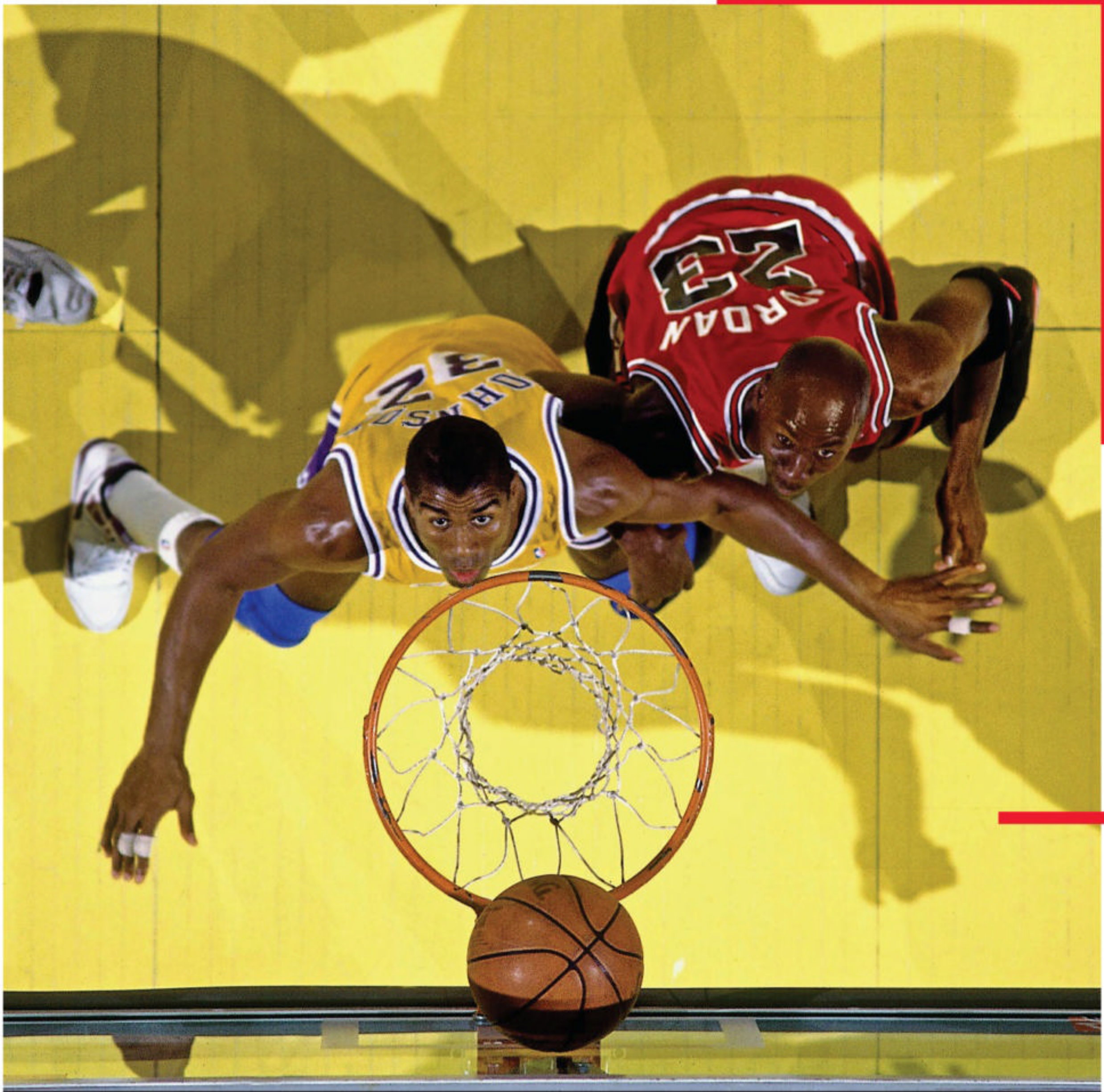
Jordan (23) goes up for a shot in Game 3 of the 1991 NBA Finals against the Los Angeles Lakers.

ONCE MICHAEL JORDAN started collecting championships, it seemed like he'd never stop. The breakthrough came in 1991, and it happened just the way Jordan wanted: The Bulls finally beat the Detroit Pistons in the Eastern Conference finals, sweeping them in four straight games. That set up an epic Finals against Magic Johnson and the Los Angeles Lakers. The Bulls lost Game 1, then won four straight for the first world title in franchise history.

Jordan led all scorers, averaging 31.2 points per game. But he made a point that series to be the ultimate team player—the one thing everyone said he couldn't be. "The championship was my opportunity to show I'm not just a scorer," he explained to *Playboy* magazine years later. "That was the challenge when everyone tried to make it a one-on-one situation, Magic versus Michael. I realized that.

"But you know, I told people that if we got to the Finals, we were going to win, if I have anything to do with it. I might never get this opportunity again. And when I got to the Finals, all I tried

Canon EOS REBEL
TIME LEFT
LAKERS
41
BULLS
23
KLAC



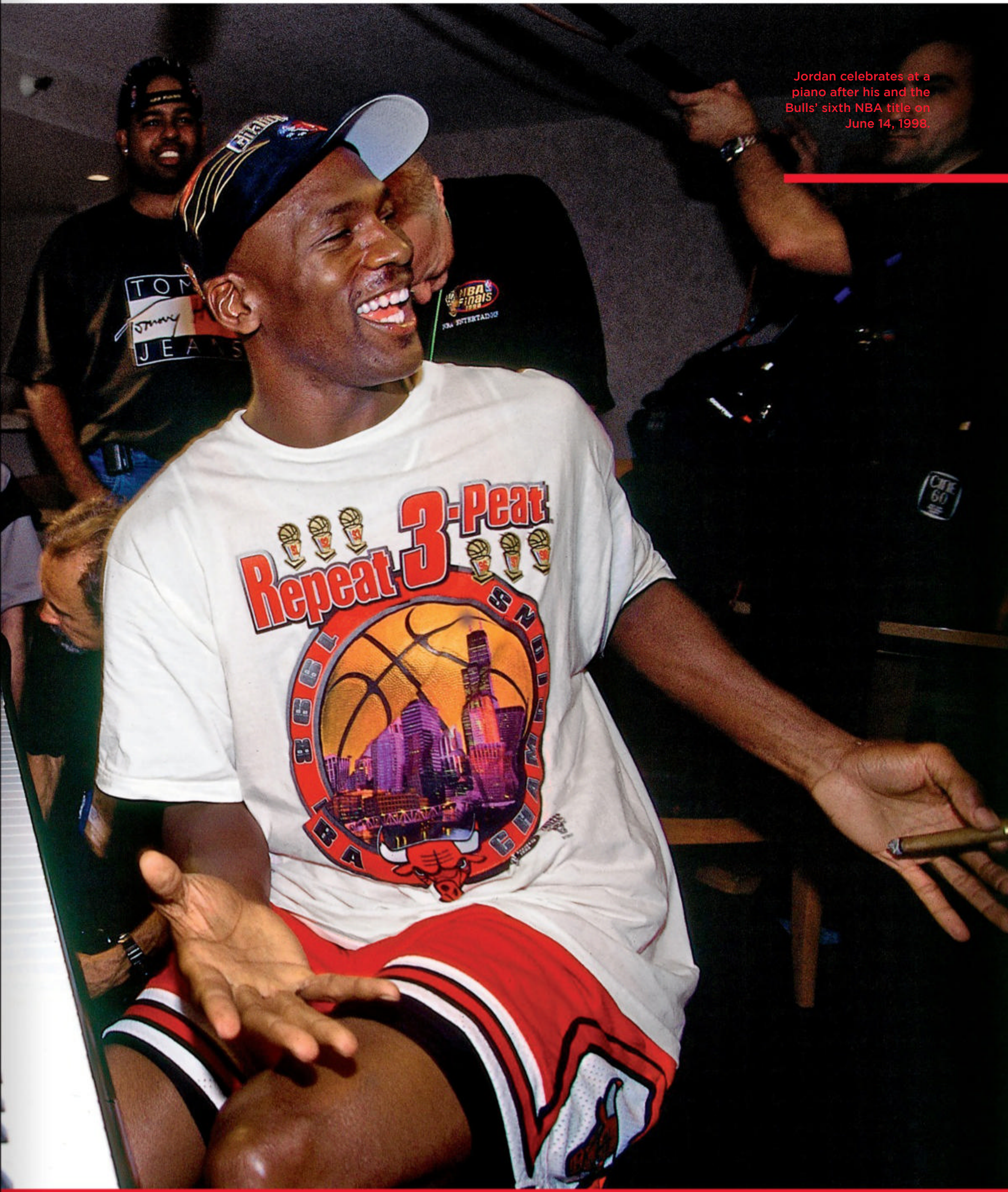
Jordan eyes a dunk in Game 4 of the 1991 Eastern Conference finals (left).

Jordan battles Magic Johnson (above, 32) for a rebound in the 1991 NBA Finals.

to do was plug holes—scoring, passing, rebounding, whatever—just as they had portrayed Magic as doing."

It was the culmination of years of work for Jordan, yet it was only the beginning. The Bulls went on to win three straight championships and turn themselves into the dominant team of the early 1990s. It was a run that was only interrupted by Jordan's surprise retirement at age 30 in 1993, when he decided to try his hand at professional baseball. When he returned two years later, Jordan and the Bulls picked up right where they left off, winning three more championships in a row.

"People say if I hadn't played baseball for a year and a half, we would be going for our eighth championship in a row," Jordan told ESPN in 1998. "But I don't think so. After our [first] three-peat, the atmosphere on the team wasn't the same."


Repeat 3-Peat
NBA Finals 1998
TOMMY JEANS

Jordan celebrates at a piano after his and the Bulls' sixth NBA title on June 14, 1998.

CHAMPIONS

Jordan with Bulls coach Phil Jackson after Chicago's victory in the 1997 NBA Finals.

Maybe not. The roster changed and the Bulls couldn't move past the Eastern Conference semis. But there is no doubt that with Jordan they would have at least had a chance to win it all—because this version of Michael Jordan really was a complete player in total control of the game.

Jordan not only had a championship-caliber team around him, but he'd also learned how to work with them, to help his teammates be better players. He may have possessed the most talent, but he also understood how to be a leader who set up those around him for success.

"There are plenty of teams in every sport that have great players and never win titles," Jordan said years later. "Most of the time, those players aren't willing to sacrifice for the greater good of the team. The funny thing is, in the end, their unwillingness to sacrifice only makes individual goals more difficult to achieve."

By the time he retired in 1999—before he unretired in September 2001 for a short stint with the Washington Wizards—his accomplishments had rewritten sports history. Jordan was a five-time MVP, a 14-time All-Star, and a 10-time scoring cham. Yet none of those accomplishments completely explain his greatness.

What mattered most to Jordan, what drove him to work so hard and what fueled his drive to succeed, was victory. The bigger the win, the better—but as long as there was a winner and loser to be named, it didn't matter to Michael Jordan if it was the postseason, regular season or practice. From the moment he stepped on the court as a rookie until the end of his playing career and beyond, Jordan always wanted to be on top.

"It's all about winning," he once said. "The stats that matter to me is games that we win and rings that you collect." That is Jordan's lasting legacy, and why so many consider him the greatest competitor ever to play the game.

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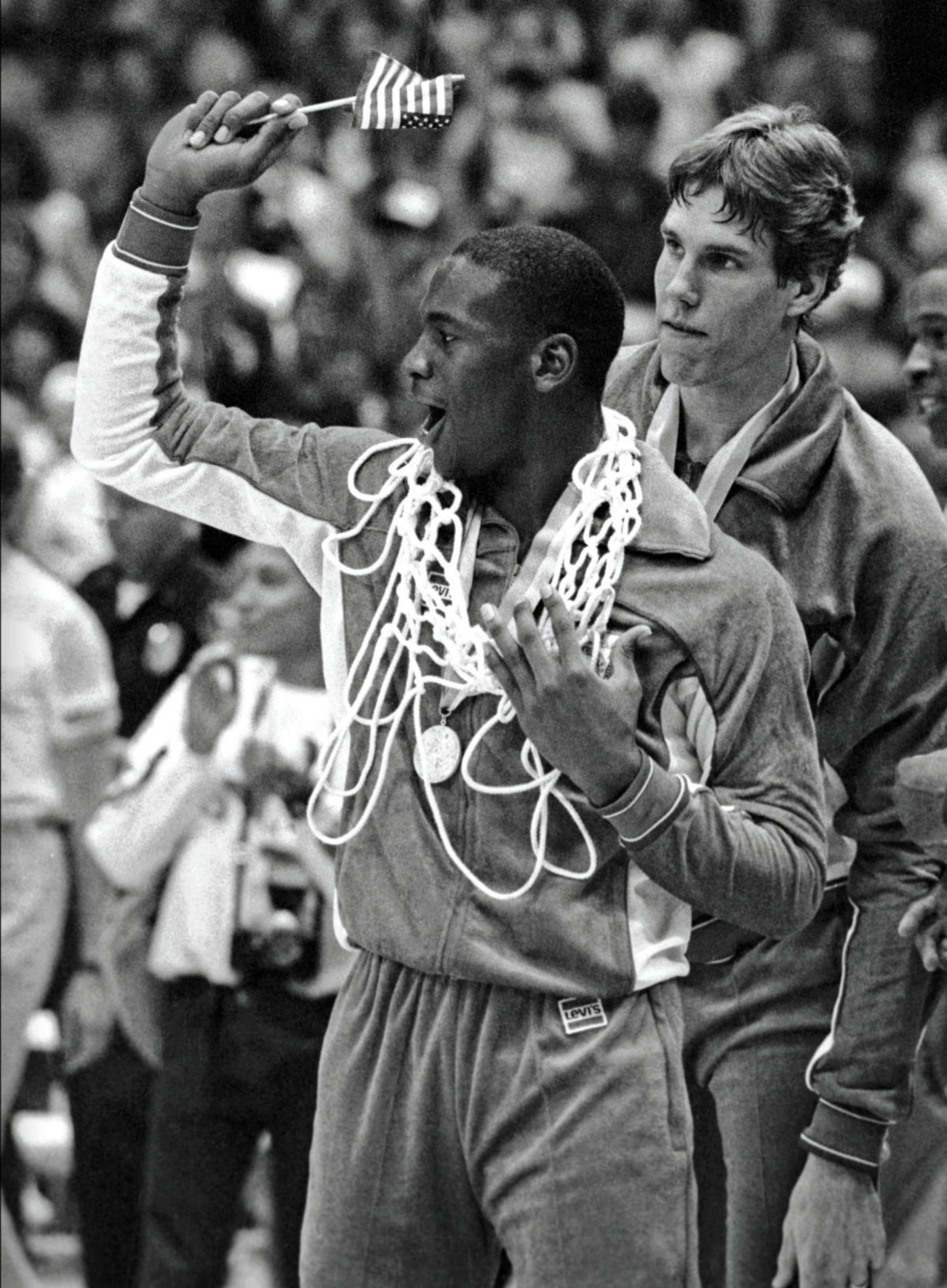
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“WE ALL FLY.

ONCE YOU LEAVE THE GROUND, YOU FLY. SOME PEOPLE FLY LONGER THAN OTHERS.”

–MICHAEL JORDAN